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**THE  
EUROPEAN  
UNION**



**A NEW ERA IN EUROPEAN  
IMPERIALISM**



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*Bourgeois hegemony lies not in the violence of the ruling class but in its ability to manufacture the spontaneous consent of the general population.*

**E**urope is a continent shaped by conflict. Since the rise of mercantilism, this conflict has taken place on both inter and intra continental levels. European states have held power over vast swathes of the globe, doing so for resources, labour power and access to markets. In Europe, the carving up of the globe led to a fragile détente between imperial powers, yet the fragility of such cordiality became clear with the onset of the First World War. Today, the evils unleashed by European colonialism continues to stamp those countries who were so viciously brought to heel. Yet, Europe has never come to terms with its past. It has never accepted it, apologised for it or renounced the privileged position that centuries of colonial conquest and imperial domination bestowed on it. As Edward Said explained, the colonised 'lost' and are therefore required to live with the very real material consequences of the period of colonial conquest.<sup>1</sup> Europe 'won' and therefore can choose to ignore the colonial enterprise as just another episode of history, to be acknowledged or not as Europeans deem fit. This reality means that a popular narrative has been allowed to devel-

op within Europe. It is the notion that fascism and Nazism were not in keeping with Europeanism and its culture. Furthermore, the notion that since the Second World War, Europe - via its institutions like the EEC and the EU - has become a continent of peace and prosperity obfuscates the price paid for this peace.

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**The internal harmony of Europe and the European Union has been predicated on the continuation of neo-colonial practices. Europe continues to be *violent*, both via its migration policies and its external economic policies.**

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As Aimé Césaire argued, the barbarism of Europe was not due to the prison guard or the adventurer, but due to the 'decent fellow', the 'respectable bourgeois' across the way.<sup>2</sup> Neo-colonialism and the inequality

associated with it has become ingrained within the institutions of Europe and our ‘respectable bourgeoisie’.

This paper attempts to map European neo-imperialism today, concentrating on the EU’s migration policies and Economic Partnership Agreements and delineating how European neo-imperialist powers use the European Union as a vehicle for their policies. This will show how the EU is an organisation specifically designed for the continuation of European imperialism in the post-war era. To understand Europe, we must analyse its relationship with its neighbours and also analyse how the material realities of Europe’s past continue to shape it today.

## The Making of Europe

Antonio Gramsci argued that the strength of bourgeois hegemony lies not in the violence of the ruling class but in its ability to manufacture the spontaneous consent of the general population.<sup>3</sup> The ruled accept the conception of the world passed down to them by the rulers and this manifests itself in the institutional arrangements of the state. Gramsci further argued that hegemony therefore is characterised by both political and intellectual leadership. The role of creating and defining the EU would therefore be a political and intellectual project with the purpose of manufacturing the spontaneous consent of the governed. This intellectual and political project has at-

tempted to create a ‘cosmopolitan Europe’, one that recognises the institutional commonalities that European countries share whilst also celebrating its cultural diversity. The EU’s motto, ‘united in diversity’ is meant to reflect this.

However, the diversity that the EU speaks of is narrow in nature and obfuscates the ‘otherness’ implicit in its definition. The EU’s definition relates only to the linguistic and cultural diversity of constituent members, the multiculturalism that exists *within* member-states is not conceptualised within this understanding of diversity. According to Bhambra “these multicultural others are not seen as constitutive of Europe’s own self-understanding – or as legitimate beneficiaries of the post-war social settlement – emerging from its history of colonialism; a history that is carried by individual nation-states and ... by the common European project itself.”<sup>4</sup> The EU in effect has managed to create a dichotomy between *cosmopolitanism* on the one hand and *multiculturalism* on the other. Europe is *cosmopolitan* and those ‘high value migrants’ it covets are as well. Poorer migrants denote *multiculturalism* and are therefore dangerous to the European project.

These definitions are implicit in which countries are considered ‘European’ and which aren’t. Schlenker for example maps the opinions of citizens of the European Union on prospective member countries. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Switzerland (80.9%), Norway (80.6%), Iceland (72.4%)



and Croatia (54.5%) (which was not in the EU at the time) were the countries EU citizens were most in favour of joining. On the other end, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Serbia, Albania and Turkey whose favourability ranged from 44.6% to 31.2%.<sup>5</sup> One could make the argument that Europeans view Switzerland more favourable because it is at the geographic heart of Europe, whereas Norway possesses a strong economy and its social welfarism - on paper at least - coincides with Europe's conception of itself. Iceland however is very far from the centre of Europe geographically and would offer nowhere near the same economic boost that the accession of a country like Turkey would offer. Furthermore, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina were constituent nations of the same state just over 20 years ago, yet there is a 10% gap in favourability for EU accession. Clearly, in the consciousness of EU citizens, there is an implicit bias in favour of those countries that are Christian or post-Christian.

## The Borders of Europe

The dialectical relationship between external and internal policies is often overlooked. External policies and the way in which countries and peoples are othered has a role in increasing internal cohesiveness and identity. Identity is usually understood in the negative: "I am something because I am not something else". Within Europe, the fight to maintain 'internal cohesiveness' has taken place throughout history, whether as a fight against 'Arabisation' in Iberia or against 'Islamification' and the Ottoman Empire. This continues to this day with the implicit association of Europe with Christian values and clearly plays a role as to why countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkey are

not considered European. There is a contradiction between the static, Christian and Athenian conception of Europe on the one hand and the supposedly fluid, dynamic and cosmopolitan Europe on the other. This conception of Europeanness, and the othering implicit within it helps define those who can and can't enter the EU. The reality of life for migrants who live on the borders of Fortress Europe or precariously within it, is grotesquely different to the Europe espoused in the EU's "four freedoms". Raj characterises this reality eloquently:



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"The European project, often characterized as the creation of an open space, free from barriers to flows and where national frontiers no longer mean anything, is a veneer that glosses an intense violence at the borders of an increasingly Fortress-like Europe. This latter violence is absolutely constitutive of the hegemonic project of Europe. This violence not only finds its expression in overt violence – beatings, arrest, detention of migrants – but also pervades the social realm in the most quotidian of instances, such that certain classes of people are made to inhabit an everyday limbo of precarity and indeterminacy in which they have to be borders. The concern of hegemonic projects such as an attempt to build a Fortress Europe, is to create a political order that relies upon maintaining a delicate and generalized violence directed against people who live their experience marked as borders, standing in welfare lines, asking for public housing, sitting in police stations and waiting for hospital treatment.<sup>6</sup>

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The borders of Europe are an institutional embodiment of the contradictions within the European project. It is the institutional embodiment of the othering process whereby the relationship individuals have with the borders of Europe is dependent on their gender, ethnicity and country of origin. Balibar describes the borders of Europe as a spatio-temporal home for migrants who repeatedly encounter, and are regulated by it, whereas the privileged are allowed to pass freely through those very same borders.<sup>7</sup> "So when a local government official in Calais declares: 'I feel the whole world and his wife have twigged that...the port is as full of holes as a piece of Gruyere cheese,' this is only partially true: the myth that the border is porous is true for some but serves precisely to make others reside there in a state of semi-permanence."<sup>8</sup> The EU is a part and driver of Balibar's "world apartheid."

An equally insidious yet overlooked consequence of EU migration policy is how EU bloc neo-imperialism "promotes the subsidisation of the EU by the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP) regions through migration to the EU of professionals such as nurses, teachers, doctors, etc."<sup>9</sup> This has a dual role: Firstly, these professionals were trained and paid for by the home country, and therefore these poorer nations subsidize rich European countries. Secondly, these countries are usually in dire need of such expertise due to the legacy of European colonialism which developed their state apparatus to be extractive. A further consequence of this notion is that some migration to Europe is necessary because of declining population rates and an ageing population that reduces migrants to nothing more than tools for European consumption, to be thrown away when no longer necessary. In essence, this

process reduces the capacity of underdeveloped countries to build their own productive forces, thus exacerbating and continuing the circle of dependency and the exploitative relationship between Europe and the South.

## Globalisation, Imperialism and the State

The internationalisation of capital, or globalisation, has paradoxically coincided with the proliferation of nation states; the UN in 1945 had 51 members, today that number has reached 193. Ellen Meiskins Wood stated that “the world today is more than ever a world of nation states. Global capitalism is nationally organised and irreducibly dependent on national states.”<sup>10</sup> Transnational firms, although important within the wider system of imperialism, do not “organise imperial economic and political relationships, rather the existence of transnational firms would not be possible without a system of states maintaining stable relations of unequal influence across the globe.”<sup>11</sup>

Robert Cox calls the process at hand the “internationalisation of the nation-state.”<sup>12</sup>

In essence, the functions of the state, such as education, welfare and taxation, and the restructuring of state assets to a deregulated and privatised model is not a retreat of the state, but instead a change in its role. It now works as a facilitator for the global-national economic paradigm. We can best define globalisation as a reorganisation of the state, rather than as an attempt to by-pass it. Governments regularly use state power to quell discontent and the anger that bubbles to the surface as a reaction to the state's neoliberal project. As Hardt and Negri explain:

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When the proponents of the globalisation of capital cry out against big government, they are being not only hypocritical but also ungrateful...where would imperial capital be if big government were not big enough to wield the power of life and death over the entire global multitude?<sup>13</sup>

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The EU plays an important yet nuanced role within this system. The purpose of the European project was not to create a single state but a common framework; a framework that helps standardise trade flows between Europe and the wider economy. Furthermore, the EU ties poorer countries - such as the ACP - to Europe as a bloc. On the one hand, this restricts the ‘trade’ between a single mother country and a colony while simultaneously “bind[ing] the ACP to the EU, indefinitely in a new type of mercantilism.”<sup>14</sup> This new mercantilism (or imperialism) attempts to confine trade between the ACP regions and the EU as a whole, rather





than in a more linear colonised-coloniser dichotomy, yet the outcomes are strikingly similar. Kwame Nkrumah was able to both perceive and define this change, stating that “the neo-colonialism of the French period is now being merged in the collective neo-colonialism of the European Common Market.”<sup>15</sup> The EU therefore is best understood as a vehicle for larger European states to continue their imperialist and neocolonial practices. The main difference in post-war Europe is not that Europe has ‘become civilised’ and has fundamentally changed; it is that Europe became acutely aware of its new place within the world system.<sup>16</sup> European states no longer possessed the comparative advantage that they were used to; it firstly had to come to terms with being the USA’s junior partner during the Cold War before more recently attempting to assert its influence in competition with the USA. The EU has attempted to export its ‘values’ rather than relying solely on military and

economic might like the USA. Hansen and Jonsson argue that calls for creating a European union were marked by the waning influence of European states.<sup>17</sup> The EU, therefore is a new form of an old system, it is a way for European countries to maintain a sphere of influence over Africa and further afield. As far as the European project is an endeavour for peaceful coexistence, it has been bought with the lives, land and labour of Africans.

### Trade as Neo-Colonialism

‘Illegal’ migration is the outcome of EU neo-imperialism arriving at the shores of Europe. However, where European neo-imperialism is most pernicious and damaging is via its trade agreements, the European Partnership Agreements. Europe’s relationship with its ex-colonies remains relatively unchanged since the time of colonialism.

Trade between Europe and Africa is veiled in terms of ‘development’ by the EU, yet “it



is striking that the development of the South became their priority just as the colonisers were leaving for home. Such passion was not in evidence during colonial rule. The ‘civilising mission’ was recast as development, although its ‘implicit racism’ was never jettisoned. In Europe’s colonial repertoire, development was the new ace.”<sup>18</sup> The way in which Europeans ‘justified’ colonialism and continue to justify unequal North-South trade today shares the same root. “Colonialism was justified by the grand lie that the West developed autonomously; it was thus superior and obliged by its history and ethics to invade the inferior, incapable non-West.”<sup>19</sup> This *white man’s burden* continues with Europe’s ‘mission’, our ‘duty’ to help the ‘undeveloped’ South. Colonialism did not end due to European goodwill but due to the struggle and determination of the colonised and because the colonial powers had created new conditions within the colonies. There now existed colonial legal systems, traditional society had been eradicated and Western ‘values’ had become the norm. The economic advantages that arose from colonialism “could now largely be obtained by more politically acceptable, and, at the same time more effective methods.”<sup>20</sup>

Walter Rodney explains how the so called ‘international’ trading system was developed within Europe and how those origins meant that, historically, trade between Africa and Europe was unequal:

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**From the beginning, Europe assumed the power to make decisions within the international trading system. An excellent illustration of that is the fact that the so-called international law which**

**governed the conduct of nations on the high seas was nothing else but European law. Africans did not participate in its making, and in many instances, African people were simply the victims, for the law recognized them only as transportable merchandise. If the African slave was thrown overboard at sea, the only legal problem that arose was whether or not the slave ship could claim compensation from the insurers! Above all, European decision-making power was exercised in selecting what Africa should export – in accordance with European needs.**<sup>21</sup>

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Although the “merchandise” being transported has changed, the underlying unequal exchange between African and Europe has not. These trade agreements continue to be ‘made in Europe’. As Mary Farrell explains: “the origins of European relations with the countries of Africa and the Caribbean can be found in the historical ties between them, based largely upon the legacy of colonialism. Through the Yaoundé Convention of the 1960s and the successor Lomé agreements, the European countries sought to retain the economic links, the access to natural resources and raw materials and other strategic economic interests they had enjoyed under colonialism.”<sup>22</sup>

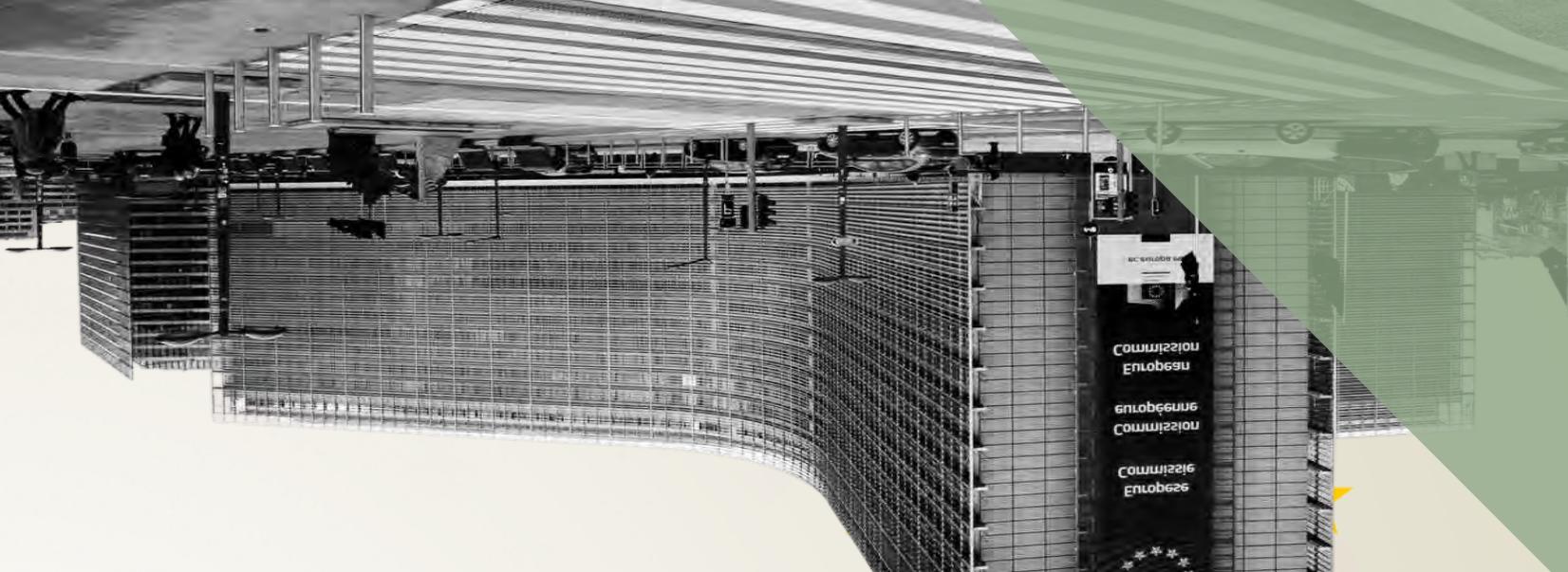
Both Kwame Nkrumah and Sekou Toure correctly warned that the new neo-colonial system would be a continuation of asymmetric trade between Africa and Europe. Although countries in Africa were now formally independent, money from aid and

pressure from European governments would push African elites to agree to trade agreements that would hinder Africa's long-term development.<sup>23</sup> As Sekou Toure remarked, trade and aid arrangements between Africa and the European Economic Community would maintain Africa's position as "hewers of wood and drawers of water."<sup>24</sup> From the very beginning it was clear that Africa would continue to supply Europe with raw materials while Africa would continue as a market for European value-added consumer goods. The EU, via its policies, continues to perpetuate the international division of labour which maintains the status quo of the global capitalist system.

## The Price of 'Free' Trade

The Cotonou Agreement (the overarching framework for EU-ACP relations) stresses the importance of "equitable development", supporting "the principles of the market economy" and "developing the private sector."<sup>25</sup> Trade opening and economic liberalisation are central tenets of Eurafrican relations, with the EU lauding free trade as a win-win for all parties involved.<sup>26</sup> This description of Eurafrican trade obfuscates the effects of the unequal relationship between Europe and Africa that affects who wins and loses from such trade. Trade tariffs imposed by African governments were a vital source of government revenue, ranging from 10% of total government resources in the more developed African states<sup>27</sup> to a staggering 35% of total treasury receipts in the case of Uganda and Senegal.<sup>28</sup> 'Free' trade between the EU and Africa therefore cut government revenue by up to a third overnight, leading to deeper, more entrenched poverty and the loss of social safety nets. African Governments feel obliged to enter into Economic Partnership Agreements with the EU as the failure to do so leads to terms under the Generalised System of Preferences. This would further hinder African development as it would entail higher export tariffs on African products. Due to European pressure, Africa is unable to develop its own productive forces or its own internal market as it deems fit, and this unequal relationship between both continents means that the structure of African economies becomes deformed as they specialise in sectors beneficial to European consumption. The sectors that Africa possesses a comparative advantage over the EU are those very same sectors that are deemed of low market value. This situation is further exacerbated by a balance of payment deficit between European and African states due to the im-





portation of high market value goods and exportation of cheaper goods or raw materials. Reciprocal free trade results in job losses and deindustrialisation in the underdeveloped world due to the import-flooding of cheap European consumables detrimental to local production. Any net gain that is seen via cheaper shopping bills pale in comparison to the wider economic hardships felt, such as rising unemployment and lack of economic diversification as value-added sectors collapse under the weight of cheaper foreign imports.

Not only is this approach neo-imperial, it is also hypocritical. “European countries reached their own current levels of economic prosperity through use of protectionist trade policy tools which are now being denied to African governments.”<sup>29</sup> Ha Joon-Chang has called this the “kicking away [of] the ladder of development.”<sup>30</sup> Today, the EU promotes free trade in commodities in mature European industries whilst it continues to protect its vulnerable industries. The EU’s Common Agricultural Policy is a clear form of economic protectionism, yet the EU insists that ACP regions open up their agricultural sectors for free trade. This has very real consequences for food security. In Ghana, 200,000 jobs have been lost in the poultry sector. In 1992, 95% of Ghana’s domestic poultry needs were supplied by the domestic market, by 2002, that number was 11%.<sup>31</sup> The World Food



Crisis of 2006-08 was precipitated by the rising price of food commodities. A reliance on imported foodstuffs prone to price volatility makes such crises more likely in future.

The EU’s imperialist policy of trade protectionism at home and trade liberalisation abroad will further exacerbate food insecurity on the continent. This seems almost criminal considering the very real issues such places already experience due to climate change and centuries of intentional underdevelopment. The EU’s trade policies therefore not only make it difficult for countries in the Global South to develop in a way that benefits their local populations, but also as ‘uncompetitive’ value-added sectors become de-industrialised, these trade policies have, and will continue to exacerbate food insecurity, which in turn is exacerbated by climate change; a product of Western overconsumption.

## Concluding Remarks

The EU facilitates European neo-imperialism. Due to Europe's changing place within the world system, it is hard to quantify how individual European states could have continued their pre-war imperial practices without such an institution. We must also call into question the ability to 'reform' the EU. The act of reforming something assumes that it is not doing its role as effectively as it could, or that it needs modernisation. The EU is doing the exact thing it was designed to do, namely to continue the underdevelopment of ACP countries, export market economy principles and maintain an uneasy alliance between European capitalists. The EU does not need reforming, it is a reformed kind of European imperialism. What is also clear is that Brexit Britain and the EU have more in common than some may care to admit. They both possess an imperialist arrogance, support neoliberalism and maintain an identity grounded in the exclusion of others. The people of Europe can push genuine, real change by showing solidarity with those Europe oppresses and by understanding that the capitalist system also leaves the workers of Europe downtrodden. Another Europe is possible, but another European Union is not.

## Endnotes

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