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## 'They abscond': migration and coloniality in the contemporary conjuncture in Europe\*

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### ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, the public sphere in Europe has become increasingly 'culturalised'. Ideas about European heritage and culture have been used as a way to exclude people, notably migrants. My intention is to understand how at this time the cultural, political and economic are articulated together in Europe. I do so by examining the trope of 'migrants absconding' which is a prominent concern of the European Commission, as reflected in legal innovations and in media and far-right generated moral panics. By focusing on the social, political and legal relations around 'migrants absconding', I read from the ground up value regimes that animate and organize the European social formation at this conjuncture. This social formation is made up of articulations along political, economic and cultural grounds, which allow for incorporating the themes of populist far right groups into the very core of the European Commission. This fosters and legitimizes value regimes bent on culturally cheapening migrants as incompatible, deviant or dangerous outsiders with a very limited right to social and political participation, much less an independent social reproduction. This then allows for their labour power to be also cheapened, super exploited and disposable. This type of value regime centring on culturally cheapening people deemed outsiders, controlling their social reproduction, and making them available as cheap labour was also a key feature of the colonial social formations of the mid 19th to mid 20th centuries, where concerns about 'natives' absconding tended to also be prominent. That there is something colonial about the contemporary conjuncture may be seen in the cultural-political-economic articulations dominant in Europe and their cultural and economic cheapening strategies. To abscond is to leave value regimes. Absconding is transgressive,

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\*"They abscond" is a statement used across a number of policy reports and risk assessments about migrants and their potential leaving of asylum adjudication processes. Typical is this statement in Frontex's risk assessment survey of 2020: "Migrants use reception facilities for shelter, they abscond, try to cross borders, and if they fail they return". (Frontex, 2020, p. 20, fn. 4). These statements reduce the complex transgressive politics to a security threat.

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it is to deliberately step out of place, and to attempt to pursue an independent social reproduction.

**KEYWORDS** Migration; Europe; absconding; colonial; coloniality

What does colonial extraction look like at this conjuncture? Mezzadra (2011) has argued that migrants disconnected from the social formation and exploitable as cheap and disposable labour play an important and specific role in the organizing of value-extractive relations at this conjuncture in Europe. I suggest that the cultural and economic cheapening strategies of the ruling bloc in Europe and its mode of production can be put into sharp relief by focusing on 'migrants absconding' and the fear of this, and the response to this. The economic and cultural 'cheapening' of migrants connects to the European colonial projects of the 19th and early 20th centuries where devaluing people and their culture was central to the strategy of occupation, exploitation and accumulation. I will argue that there are important resonances between the value regimes of colonial social formations and the contemporary European social formation, or more specifically the ruling blocs that organize these social formations and their value regimes.

I aim to understand the contemporary conjuncture from the ground up, that is: to analyse the social formation and its cultural-economic-political articulations from an analysis of the residual and the emergent, those cultural-economic-political articulations that point to a different account of the social and against which the ruling bloc must struggle (Williams 1977, Ahmad 1994, Hart 2020). Moments of absconding present us with this opportunity. I will suggest that to abscond is to make a case for a different value regime and thus to a different organization of the social, political and the economic. This is evident in the scholarship on community solidarity with migrants, particularly those irregularised, and the imaginations of society and Europe that they work towards (Cantat 2016b, Cantat 2021).

Starting from reports about the reality or fear of migrants absconding and legal innovations to address this (and to continue to highlight absconding), I will build upwards to articulate a sense of the contemporary global conjuncture as it is revealed in Europe. This conjuncture is marked by the culturalisation of the political sphere, the cultural cheapening of some groups as deviant outsiders to Europe and the intensive value-draining of their labour (Kovai 2019, Eredics 2022). I focus on migrants as commonly marginalized along with other groups who also experience the sharp end of power at this conjuncture (Rajaram 2015). Rather than isolating migrants as specific types of subjects, running the risk of a type of methodological individualism, I'm interested in the social and class position of migrants in relation to

contemporary political and economic power, a position and relation shared with others.

The fear of people absconding and the legal and bureaucratic practices to control this possibility were also central to colonial social formations of the 19th and 20th centuries. There are different ways of examining colonial power in the present, and indeed the idea that there is something colonial about contemporary migration has had significant attention in recent years (Mayblin 2017, Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018, Sammadar 2020, Mayblin and Turner 2021, Pastore 2021, Caglar 2022). These arguments have centred on apparent similarities between colonial strategies of ruling by naming and marking 'difference' and European bordering strategies targeting and excluding migrants as culturally or otherwise deviant and threatening. While there is much to be learned from that approach, it does not tell us enough about the durability of colonial power, its formation and persistence across time and space.

Focusing on the trope of people absconding allows us to consider how value regimes concerned with immobilizing people arise and what they might be built on. What are people said to be absconding from, and why was it, and is it, so troublesome a concern? I will argue that immobilizing 'culturally cheapened' people to extract value was a central characteristic of colonial social formations and is repeated in contemporary European social formation. The colonial social formations were characterized by ruling blocs made up of political and economic institutions grounded in the weaponisation of culture as a way to build community through exclusion. So too in Europe today where populist and far right instrumentalisations of European 'heritage' increasingly occupy the European Union and Commission. In the colonial social formation, this culturalisation of the public sphere emerged at a conjuncture marked by the 19th and 20th centuries in the encounter with non-European others holding valuable land and resources, the loss of slavery and forced labour by capital and the channelling of its racial hierarchies into economic and political innovations to reproduce as cheap labour as possible such as indenture and the continued growth of capital requiring investment beyond limited European markets. In Europe today the value regime is grounded in a constructed spectacle of migrants threatening Europe's cohesiveness, the fragmentation of the working classes and their gains of the 1970s, the gradual dominance of super-exploitative capitalism and the realization that people excluded from political and social participation – like migrants – are particularly super-exploitable as cheapened labour in the gaps left by the losses of the working class (Rajaram 2018). The contemporary conjuncture then harks to the colonial in the weaponisation of culture, manifest in the cultural cheapening of migrants as deviant and threatening, and in the articulations between culture, capital and politics that centre on migrants being exploited for cultural and economic gain.

## The coloniality of absconding

It is in the European Commission's Returns Directive (European Parliament 2008) where the term 'abscond' becomes a category of the law. The Returns Directive is 'the main piece of EU (European Union) legislation governing the procedures and criteria to be applied by Member States when returning irregularly staying third-country nationals, and [is] a cornerstone of EU return policy' (European Parliament 2021, p. 1). Like all directives to do with migration in the Commission, it falls under the aegis of the Commissioner for Promoting our European Way of Life.

In 2018, in response to a decrease in returns of 'irregularly staying third country nationals' (falling from 45.8% in 2016–29% in 2019), the European Commission (EC) proposed a 'recast' of the directive with the aim to 'reduce the length of return procedures, secure a better link between asylum and return procedures, and ensure a more effective use of measures to prevent absconding.' (European Parliament 2021, p. 1; citing European Commission without attribution). The Commission noted that another principle reason for recasting the directive is the 'inconsistent definitions and interpretations of the risk of absconding' (European Commission 2018) To that end, Article 6 of the proposed recast directive aims to set out 'objective criteria for the existence or not of a risk of absconding.' A technical, expert, and managerial perspective is put forward:

To prevent diverging or ineffective interpretations, the proposal sets out a common, non-exhaustive, list of objective criteria to determine the existence of a risk of absconding as part of an overall assessment of the specific circumstances of the individual case. (European Commission 2018, p. 7)

A key feature of the Common European Asylum System is the policing of 'secondary movements' – the movement of people from an area where they are either under asylum processing or have been granted refugee status to another European country. People who leave to apply for asylum in another country are said to be irregular and absconding. The concern about 'secondary movements' speaks to the general concern about migrants moving 'illegitimately', but it also points to a general concern about the trustworthiness of refugees and their general burden to the cohesiveness of Europe. Critical migratin scholars however argue that these movements may be seen as deliberate transgressions of a system that immobilizes migrants (Aru 2022). As I will argue later, when migrants abscond, they are making the case for an independent social reproduction and not one directed for the accumulation of cultural and economic capital serving the interests of a ruling bloc in Europe.

Laws and regulations to prevent absconding were also a key instrument of policing the movements of natives in the colony. The term 'absconding' chiefly applied to indentured labourers, or those contracted to live and work on

plantations, who escaped these confines without authorization. Absconders became vagrants or vagabonds, people without a social or economic purpose or function and hence without attributed value. In the colony, anti-vagrancy and absconding legislation built on the moral panics of nineteenth century European bourgeois nation-building projects (Ahmad 1994), associating vagrants with 'immoral' prostitutes and beggars of the metropole, and travelling 'gypsies' (MacLaughlin 1999). In French and British Africa in the twentieth century, concerns about the ending of forced labour were couched in narratives about the 'laziness' of Africans, who required the legal and physical enclosures of labour (Keese 2014). In Assam, in the early twentieth century tea plantation owners and managers were given the right to hunt down 'absconded' workers (India Office Records n.d.). The same right was given to employers of Chinese tin miners by the Selangor Labour Code of 1895 in Malaya. In Bengal tea planters association worried about absconding workers who left to other gardens and disguised themselves with new names.<sup>1</sup> In all cases, absconding workers were subject to criminal proceedings. Debates about sex workers in Rangoon involved concern about the extent to which they spilled out from their enclosure in a specific neighbourhood. From the concern about virtue, one moves to the fear of 'coolies' left to their own devices. In an editorial in the Malayan Straits Times following work riots in 1912, 'when roused, the coolies are dangerous and there is only one way to deal with them ... We have to keep ever in mind that a vast proportion of the coolie population in Malaya is capable of hideous deeds.' (Straits Times 24 February 1912, Rajaram 2014).

Colonial power was worked out in complex social formations. What we typically perceive by 'colonial power' is the outcome of a process of marshalling political, intellectual and cultural resources by a historically contingent ruling bloc that for the most part made dispossession, cheapening and exploitation durable. This was relational; marshalling resources was a struggle, requiring ideological and material organization to direct the complex relations of society into an organizable and exploitable order and to form and maintain articulations in the historical ruling bloc across political and civil society and against alternative narratives and politics. When considering colonial power today, or the 'coloniality' of power (Quijano 2000) as it is sometimes put, we would do well to begin with the relational historical process of embedding colonial rule in complex social formations, with the patterns that were created, and with consideration of the durability of such patterns. This puts a damper on large statements about the continuity of colonial power, by which is often meant its ostensible effects (racialising of migrants in Europe for example) and not the historical contexts – the social formations and their cultural, political and economic articulations – within which these 'effects' gained degrees of prominence and durability.

Generally speaking, European colonial projects of the 19th and 20th centuries aspired to institutionalize dispossession, the terms of exploitation and value drain in law and bureaucracy. These registers began by seeking to define, stabilize and categorize complex social and cultural processes, notably work, land, and property regimes and making them regulable. The colonial gaze simplified complex societies, and tried to embed them into a racialised version of a capitalist market. Work for example was shorn of the multiple cultural relations that determined its value and was reduced to governable labour. Land was extricated from similar relations and became part of a relational property regime. Such reductions were of course also replete with culturalisations, though this was actively denied. 'European' notions of productivity and private ownership dominated. 'Natives' were a coerced part of these but doomed to never quite measure up. Bureaucratic and legal registers sought to institutionalize a concrete and simplified representation of governable reality out of the messiness of social relations (Mitchell 1989). The durability of such arrangements depended on the political, economic and cultural agreements and compromises made to hold together the ruling bloc. The ruling bloc in colonial social formations was made up of shifting alliances with different perspectives gaining precedence with respect to specific situations. This changed over time: for example, across a number of colonial social formations ideas about sex work – a type of labour central to the maintenance of the dominating, extractive and masculine colonial authority – changed with different constellations of the ruling bloc gaining authority; the typical shift was away from a military-medical domination over sex work relations towards a religious and feminist framing that emphasized its immorality..

An argument can be made that the governing of complex social formations required not simply exploitation and imposition but the cultivation of a value regime involving a diversity of groupings reflected in the way power was held and wielded in a ruling bloc. Sticking with the example of sex work, at a certain point across colonial social formations, prostitutes' exploitability went unquestioned, the value regime did not recognize them as subjects worthy of representation; this would change through the lobbying of religious groups and metropole-based feminist organizations (Levine 2004, Levine 2013, Legg 2014).

The immobilization of colonized subjects to enable the extraction of material and cultural value was central to colonial social formations. The extraction of value accounted in material or monetary terms involved the immobilization of labourers physically in 'coolie lines' or legally through indenture and other labour regimes. Cultural capital was extracted from discursively immobilized subjects – a wealth of ethnographic and other material reduced 'natives' to their essences, to a culture that was knowable and always in a secondary and subservient relation to a stylized 'European culture' across any relationship imaginable. The 'lack' attributed to colonized people

contrasted with a purported 'fullness' of 'European civilization' and concealed its class and gender hierarchies. These forms of immobilization and value extraction were connected: culturally immobilized – culturally cheapened – people were denied social or political participation and reduced to the functions that they played in the extraction of value for ruling others and their social reproduction as a dominating class. Cultural cheapening enabled material cheapening and the extraction of cheap labour.

These forms of immobilization were central and necessary to the continuity of the colonial project, the alliances of the ruling bloc depended on such immobilisations so that the interests and social reproduction of its different groupings could be served. There was much anxiety about the possibility of colonized subjects leaving these arrangements and absconding which would make both material and cultural capital difficult to be had and potentially in some cases threatening the cohesion of the ruling bloc. The colonial social formation was stable to the extent that its value regime remained. Absconding was then not merely to leave an arrangement, it was to leave government and the value regime that legitimized that mode of government: it was to bring to light a residual or dominated value regime which referenced other arrangements of community, society, justice and politics; it was to attempt an independent social reproduction that did not serve the social reproduction of the ruling class.

To dampen autonomous social reproduction, the trope of absconding labourers as a threat gained currency. In Malaya, Chinese 'coolies' were framed as absconding potential rioters, rather than, as the historical record suggests, often politically mobilized (Rajaram 2014). 'Natives' in or out of the enclosure also provided a useful source of accumulating cultural capital. The tropes of laziness and immorality served to strengthen European sensibility and civilization against a colonized one depicted as lacking. An order of morality in the public sphere came to be clarified, certain things and certain people came to be seen as out of place (Dirks 1997). This effectively culturalised the public sphere, making entry into it dependent on demonstrating a certain form of 'virtue' or 'civilization'.

Starting from what Raymond Williams (1977) called the residual and the emergent – imaginations of new social formations concretized or hoped for by 'absconding' – we can build up towards an idea of the complex colonial social formation: at once extractive, racist and masculine. The colonial conjuncture was marked by the growing requirement for new sites of capital accumulation *and* by cultural tropes that harked to the growing bourgeois nationalisms in Europe where the presumed 'immorality' of deviant populations resonated with the cheapening of 'native' populations. The combination of populist (culture-extractive) and economic (capital-extractive) forces allowed the instrumentalisation of 'natives' for the purposes of accumulating cultural and money capital and the reproduction of terms of rule.



## Abscinding in the contemporary conjuncture

Migrants 'abscinding' from enclosures cause panic in Europe today, or at least it is reported as such. There are any number of media reports on the security risks supposedly posed by migrants gone missing – or potentially going missing – from holding centres or from 'processing'. Cantat *et al* (2023) write of the construction of a moral panic about migrants fostered by politicians – especially far right populists – and the media, including over their supposed security threat and their perceived incompatibility of non-European culture with European culture. The moral panic speaks then in a general way to the culturalisation of politics in Europe, and more specifically to the European Commission's dog-whistle racial politics of recent times. Migration directives and legislation, including the proposed recast returns directive, fall under the aegis of the Commissioner for Promoting our European Way of Life, established by the von Leyen presidency in 2019. The original title of the job was 'Protecting our European Way of Life' but was changed at the last moment under pressure. By instrumentalising 'European' 'heritage', the EC opens space for authoritarian populism, even if this is not their explicit intent.

Accounts of heritage and identity are forms of boundary-work. The question is whether that boundary is permeable, allowing exchanges and entanglements, or intended to be a marker of exclusiveness and exclusion? (van der Waal *et al* 2022). Connecting the focus on promoting European ways of life to the control of migration may thicken the boundary. From the 1970s, the EU promoted Europeanness as the sharing of common values, such as concern for human rights and democracy, and often a little less explicitly, also for the free capitalist market (Delanty 1995, Cantat 2016a). All this centred around an imaginary of a common European heritage. These accounts of heritage and common European values had, at least rhetorically, a sense of diversity. Values were deemed universal and were assumed to take a specific form in a Europe diverse but united. The rise of populist right wing parties in the last decade or so across Europe – and globally – seems however to have contributed to an instrumentalisation of a homogenizing and exclusionary sense of European identity. Articulated in the face of 'crises', including the so-called migration crisis of 2015, right-wing politicians appropriated and re-presented the crisis of people moving as a crisis of European values, circumscribed and shorn of even its rhetorical diversity (Cantat and Rajaram 2019, Cantat *et al.* 2023). An explicit connection was made by President von der Leyen between 'our European Way of Life' and irregular migration. In a letter addressed to the commissioner nominated to this portfolio, she wrote, 'the European way of life is built around solidarity, peace of mind and security. We must address and allay legitimate fears and concerns about the impact of irregular migration on our economy and society' (BBC 2019).

The office for the Promotion of Our European Way of Life includes a range of operations that have been rhetorically and discursively made to appear related. The commissioner in charge is responsible for building equality and diversity, making education more accessible, preventing, detecting and responding to 'hybrid threats', integrating 'legal' migrants into 'the job market and society', leading the Commission's fight against anti-semitism and developing common approaches to migration which include combating irregular migrants.<sup>2</sup> The running together of operations such as those above constitute a system of representation (Hall 1996) that projects a way of seeing where compatibility and connection emerges through the work of ideology, here an ideology of Europeanness. The capacity to control interpretation and meaning, and regulate the seemingly unrelated and incompatible was a characteristic of the colonial project, where liberal law sat together with oppressive ones, and humane policies were conducted alongside inhumane ones (Mitchell 1989, Steinmetz 2008).

Incompatibility is resolved by naming both the promotion of equality and the enforcement of borders as part of 'promoting our European way of life'. In a similar vein, the colonial project named both the religious conversion of the native and their forced labour to foster good productive habits as means of fostering civilization. This discursive empire would have it that migrants absconding are not simply escapees from holding centres or screening processes; they are an affront to the European way of life. Imperialism evokes bodies whose unruly presence – or independent social reproduction – is an affront: vagabonds to be controlled. The proposed recast returns directive notes the following among criteria to assess the risk of absconding: lack of financial resources, and lack of residence, fixed abode or reliable address.

The culturalisation of the European public sphere by far right parties has, in a generous reading, led to counter-moves by the EC and the formalization of a more expansive notion of a European way of life. The common point between the far right populists and the European Commission is the refinement of an ideological framework in relation to which the migrant is always the outsider potentially posing a security or cultural threat by absconding. Or, in other words, the common point is the culturalisation of the public sphere, dampening political contestation in favour of performances of cultural identity.

It is too simple to say that there is an explicit alliance between the European Commission and far right parties. But the work of culturalising the European public sphere that is rooted in attempts to exclude migrants as 'others' seems to have cultivated an agenda that the Commission is picking p on. In a passage where he makes a critique of economic determinism in political action against historical blocs, Gramsci speaks of how connections can be formed to redirect political forces and form a new historical bloc. While

Gramsci is speaking about strategy for anti-hegemonic struggle, his insight is telling on how new historical blocs can emerge from a moment of rupture and reorient political and economic structures:

An appropriate political initiative is always necessary to liberate the economic thrust from the dead weight of traditional policies – i.e. to change the political direction of certain forces which have to be absorbed if a new, homogeneous politico – economic historical bloc, without internal contradictions, is to be successfully formed. And, since two ‘similar’ forces can only be welded into a new organism either through a series of compromises or by force of arms, either by binding them to each other as allies or by forcibly subordinating one to the other, the question is whether one has the necessary force, and whether it is ‘productive’ to use it. (Gramsci 1971, p. 168)

The conjuncture that is emerging or emergent now in Europe is marked, as Gillian Hart says with reference to a more global perspective, by the growth of populist politics bent on culturalising societies and their boundaries (Hart 2019). It is important to parse out how emerging historical blocs articulated with culturalist-populist forces attempt to control and (re)-direct a social formation and its ‘economic thrust’, i.e. how the forces and relations underpinning a system of production – the structure – relates to the ‘super-structure’. This is not to say that the value regimes of the European social formation are coherent. They are rather based on complex articulations between different forces and contradictions and disjunctures arise. The cultural cheapening of migrants is a prelude to their economic cheapening, and their social reproduction is subject therefore to a range of interests and ideologies.

The culturalisation of the public sphere in Europe can be parsed out into specific operations. These include the culturalisation of the political, which dampens class and other affiliations in favour of an identity politics; the transformation of political education into learning civic competencies (Biesta 2009, Rajaram 2022); the assertion of the cultural outsidership of the migrant, in particular the irregularised or potentially irregularisable migrant; and the reinforcement of a ‘European way of life’ by drawing on the outsider migrant as its other.

The contemporary unfolding populist-neoliberal hegemony that may mark this conjuncture as it is revealed in Europe is founded on emerging historical blocs that have combined institutional power and culturalist accounts of the political. In the European case, the articulations emerging between the European Commission and far right populists rationalizes the culturalisation of the political and connects it to the maintenance of the outsider status of a subaltern class, in this case particularly irregularised migrants seeking asylum or work in Europe. The articulations between the right wing and the EC may mark the emergence of a particular economic form, with two effects: the cultural cheapening of disposable labour, and the replacement

of class solidarity with identity based cultural politics that detract attention from growing inequalities.

The culturalisation of the political has contributed to a depoliticization of the European public sphere, with an emphasis on the acquiring of civic competencies, furthered by the European education area (also under the competency of the Commissioner for the Promotion of our European Way of Life) and its connection to the cultivation of 'active' citizenship understood as participating in European civil society in support of European ideals. The culturalisation of the political has contributed to the introduction of cultural forces in the 'economic thrust' of the social formation. Subaltern outsiders, affronts to be closed off from the public sphere, are amenable to immobilization and exploitation as cheapened labour.

Since about the 1990s a number of advanced capitalist states have been marked by the generalization of economic competition as a means of governing society, and a rise of racist authoritarianism re-imagining national projects. The two do not necessarily follow the same trajectory and indeed may at some points be contradictory. Since the twenty-first century, the trend has been their reconciliation. In Europe, this has particularly been the case in the east of the continent (Fabry 2019, Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton 2020). Fabry (2019) tracks the adoption of classically neoliberal economic measures in Hungary (a flat tax, a reduction in corporate taxes, a reduction in social spending) alongside the appeal to ethno-populist views intended to cohere a population against a threat from the outside. Gagy (2016) has a similar view on the rise of what she calls 'antidemocratic populism' which works to conceal the contradictions between worker and elite interests by focusing on enemies of national development. Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton (2020) note that similar populist trends (they also include the appeal to heteronormativity) in Hungary, Croatia and Poland lead to important shifts in how social reproduction is envisioned focusing on who may be part of a deserving population. It is a telling, and probably at some point explosive, contradiction that the EU generally does not seem to share the heteronormative value regime in these and other countries.

The reshaping of the 'economic thrust' of the social formation in European countries is put into motion by appeal to a value regime that validates a restructuring of social provisioning and social ordering in ways that hark to Thatcher's authoritarian populism (Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton 2020). Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton refer to Stuart Hall when arguing that, like in Thatcher's Britain, there is a tendency to govern by dichotomizing so that complex social realities become mapped out in unambiguous and polarizing moral terms (Hall 1988, Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton 2020, Danewid 2022). The moralizing of social provisioning and of the system of production itself harks to imperialist and colonial projects (and indicates that the site of

production is not the narrow economic realm but society at large with its multiple relations and hierarchies).

The tendency to exploit labour cheapened culturally and then economically has been present in modern advanced capitalist economies for much of the twentieth century but its scope and force were weakened by other successful historical blocs, notably the collective action and bargaining of working class representatives in western Europe. The gradual erosion of this through the increasing financialisation of the world economy following Bretton Woods and the consequent surplus of cheap capital requiring a spatial fix has led to various political-economic issues at the global scale, notably the weakening of the collective bargaining power of the working classes and the burying of the rebellions from former colonized societies under a mountain of debt and IMF-cultivated confluences of austerity with virtue. It is however, the formation of new historical blocs along cultural and populist lines that marks a fundamental shift. With reference to the seminal text *Policing the Crisis*, Gillian Hart (2020) shows us how Hall and his co-authors (1978) analysed Thatcher's neoliberal agenda as intertwined with the representations of social crises. Thatcher's neoliberal policies were put forward as an integral and even necessary part of solving crises, and there was some success in framing neoliberal policies as a matter of virtue and right behaviour. The social provisioning regimes of neoliberalism were not simply a means of accumulation but were virtuous and morally-tinged instruments of *social ordering*.

The emergent conjuncture in Europe, and perhaps globally, is one that has built on crises – in Europe, the Greek debt crisis, Brexit and the so-called migration crisis of 2015 – to make an articulation with populist and nationalist movements feasible (Clarke 2014, Clarke 2019). The different crises had their different policy responses, for example the Capital Markets Union designed to double down on financial markets as a mode of governing, potentially opening up new spaces for financial intervention in Europe and normalizing citizens' investment in capital markets.<sup>3</sup> The CMU is a response to both the Greek debt crisis and the vacuum in European financial markets potentially caused by Brexit. The onus on making fundamentally political choices about money an everyday and sensible choice is connected to promoting 'our' European ways of life: both speak to everyday sensibilities, a common-sense. Both finance investment choices and the struggle against migrants become caught up in value regimes that exhort sensible or correct behaviour.

The turn to a value-based account of how to conduct financial and political lives in Europe emerges from a growing neoliberalising streak in the EU marked by a number of factors including the erosion of collective bargaining and hence the political influence of working classes and the transition to workfare regimes which come with the boundarying and policing of ghettos, asserting the evictability from social formations of people such as

Roma and migrants, commonly marginalized by the social formation. This enables the extraction of 'imperial rent' from people marginalized and subject to value-extractive arrangements such as problematic housing contracts (Anjum [forthcoming](#)). The terms of their social reproduction, the possibility of their existence, is now no longer simply something to be controlled; it is monetized. The conjuncture is marked by forms of money – and cultural-capital extraction from migrants and others commonly marginalized with migrants, and made durable by the cultural-economic articulations between the far right and the European Commission.

How, then, do we think conjuncturally about this moment? It emerges not as an epoch, not a neoliberal epoch or a populist epoch, but as an emergent and at points contradictory articulation between different forces as a response to ongoing and complexly rooted crises. Crises of Brexit, debt and migration speak to complex and contingent social realities, and the response to dealing with its problems by forcing a moral dichotomy on social formations seeks both to recapture and reframe an 'economic thrust' to foster forms of cultural and capital accumulation. The dominant forces that appear at this conjuncture, where the economic and the cultural become intertwined, do not appear out of the blue. They speak to projects of accumulation and government centred on cultural and economic cheapening that has been a part of the capitalist state's toolkit since at least the nineteenth century. The entrance into political society of the metropole's deviants and the gains made by collective action by the working classes led for a while to different political projects and accommodations and compromises made by capitalists. The return of culture at this conjuncture can be explained by a rise in identity politics throughout advanced capitalist societies; their emergent hegemony in Europe can be explained by alliances carved with institutions of governance, forming a new historical bloc.

## Conclusion

The concrete situations in which capitalism and cultures merged point to multiple relations and forces that went into their making. The emerging or emergent historical bloc can be explained by broadly-stated accounts of primitive accumulation, dispossession and disenfranchisement that tend towards large epochal histories, but one consequence is that the stories and histories of those who are ostensibly defeated and exploited by capitalism are not told, or if they are told they are bordered-off histories of life and reproduction projects that have failed. If it can be shown that bourgeois – or colonial capitalist – relations of rule are not singly determined but dynamically shaped in relation to struggles undertaken by the colonized labouring classes, then the ostensibly minor histories are constitutive elements of the relations of rule.

Acts of 'absconding' may be seen as signs of struggles, or the politics of others in crisis. Leaving immobilization in labour camps or the asylum process is to refuse waiting and the temporalities imposed. It is a way of responding to the ceaseless bordering that many migrants experience. Khosravi (2021) argues that waiting at the border is not empty stillness but provides a surplus of time, time in which one can be productive, to plan how to respond and act. Waiting doesn't always involve stillness and a surplus of time; it does involve busying oneself – or being busied – undertaking something else, labouring, while waiting for the opening that would allow participation. The culturalisation of the public sphere in Europe, like the colonial public sphere, increasingly militates against such participation. To abscond in this situation may be to turn to existing openings or create them. These may be pathways to participation in the public sphere, often referring to or calling on accounts of community and politics that are fought against by the dominating power that would have migrants in states of waiting and exploitation.

The culturalisation of the European public sphere is unevenly applied across the continent. In some countries discourses and practices effectively close off spaces of participation for migrants and asylum seekers, creating hostile and racist environments bent on control and exclusion, like in the UK and Hungary. But there remain within Europe sites and practices of solidarity that emerge because of limitations and inconsistencies in the implementation of power. Refugees in Hungary increasingly abscond the system with its limitations on public participation to start asylum processes elsewhere in Europe.

Higher education is a seemingly banal but actually important site where these dynamics take place. Education provides pathways to participation but refugees and asylum seekers in Europe have restrictions imposed on their right to education because of outright refusal of the right to study, non- or under-recognition of qualifications gained, obscure and difficult applications systems, lack of assistance with language and skills development, lack of scholarships, integration contracts that restrict people to specific territories, and an onus on getting refugees into the workforce. In an initiative I've worked with for the last six years at Central European University, the Open Learning Initiative (OLive), we've used Erasmus+ funding, designed to foster the development of civic competencies and the depoliticization that comes with this (Biesta 2009), to provide pathways to higher education for displaced people throughout Europe. This has resulted in some cases to people leaving asylum and integration processes from elsewhere in Europe to Hungary, of all places, where OLive was headquartered. In creating opportunities from European Union funding, OLive sought to capitalize on remnants of another sensibility and culture, one that could open up pathways to participation.

The directives that seek to control, immobilize, exploit and exclude migrants do so on the basis of their non-belonging. In this sense, integration is another side of the same process – imposing conditions and processes that people must follow to demonstrate that they deserve to belong. This restriction on autonomy is struggled against when people abscond, where what is being sought is not belonging but the right and capacity to participate and for an independent social reproduction. In this, migrants absconding hold up the possibility of re-imagining the European public sphere.

## Notes

1. Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Dooars Planters Association for the year 1916. With Proceedings of the Annual General Meeting held on 16th January 1917. British Library India Office Archives. MSS EUR F174/694.
2. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/schinas\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/schinas_en). Accessed 12 March 2023.
3. The website of the CMU exhorts European citizens: 'Own your future. Invest in you! You want to make your money grow, take control of your finances and make smart investments choices for a better future? Investing in capital markets can help you achieve your goals.'. [https://finance.ec.europa.eu/capital-markets-union-and-financial-markets/capital-markets-union\\_en](https://finance.ec.europa.eu/capital-markets-union-and-financial-markets/capital-markets-union_en). Accessed 2 March 2022.

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