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A BOOK REVIEW FORUM ON *POLITICISING COMMODIFICATION*

Cornel Ban, Élodie Béthoux, Martin Rhodes, Miguel Martínez Lucio, Roland Erne, Sabina Stan, Darragh Golden, Imre Szabó, and Vincenzo Maccarrone

Politicising Commodification: European Governance and Labour Politics from the Financial Crisis to the Covid Emergency. By Roland Erne, Sabina Stan, Darragh Golden, Imre Szabó, and Vincenzo Maccarrone. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 434 pp. ISBN 9781316511633, \$120 (hardcover); ISBN 9781009054362, \$39.99 (paperback); <http://hdl.handle.net/10197/25526> or <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009053433> (open access e-book).

**Politics and Commodification:
Rereading the European Semester**

Review by Cornel Ban¹

After the Great Financial Crisis, the European Union forged a new economic governance (NEG) regime whose prescriptions were encased in yearly country-specific policy prescriptions, surveillance, and enforcement known as the (European) Semester. A rich literature on the Semester showed that NEG was not an implacable revolution from above but an opportunity structure inviting local translations through technocratic appropriations, as well as labor union action and social movements. However, *Politicising Commodification* is the first book to systematically study the interplay between the national and transnational social and economic processes engendered by NEG across commodifying and decommodifying EU integration mechanisms. As such, Roland Erne, Sabina Stan, Darragh Golden, Imre Szabó, and Vincenzo Maccarrone refreshingly move us beyond Fritz Scharpf's distinction of negative and positive integration to one comparing horizontal and vertical integration modes. They also take us beyond the canonical opposition between state-centered (intergovernmental or supranational) paradigms of EU law and political science, into a corporate-centered approach that likens the NEG to a transnational corporation.

This beautifully argued and sharply structured neo-Polanyian book is a most sophisticated, yet highly readable source for scholars (and practitioners) interested in navigating the opaque NEG regime, from its grand architectures to its dynamic engine rooms. Indeed, the book is most inspiring for its structure. *Politicising Commodification* looks across two cross-sectoral areas (employment relations and public services), three public services sectors

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(transport, water, healthcare services), in four EU member states, namely, Germany, Italy, Ireland, and Romania. The book maps out the shifting contents of the NEG, its elite politics at the EU and national levels, and the responses of trade unions and new social movements to EU executives' NEG prescriptions, with a comparison of the pre- and post-Covid periods.

Several substantive arguments are memorable. First, NEG is an EU governance instrument that is hardly good news for those wishing to democratize the EU because NEG's very institutional design (policy formulation, bureaucratic procedures, enforcement systems) makes it difficult for unions and social movements to politicize NEG issues at the transnational level. As a result, marketization reforms that had not been possible for decades became possible after 2008 under a NEG that provided EU executives new tools to circumvent resistance. Second, NEG appears to the authors to be a corporate governance framework in a complex value chain framework whereby the lead firm steers subsidiaries and partners in multiple jurisdictions using "whipsawing tactics, coercive comparisons and subsidiary-specific ad hoc interventions" (p. 319). But difficult does not mean impossible and the book shows that the NEG rule was heavily contested, with NEG making unions and social movements broaden their demand menu at both the EU and national levels. As a result of the ensuing legitimacy crisis powering inter alia the "populism" moment, some elements of this corporate governance framework of the EU were softened after Covid. That said, even when commodifying policy reforms were accompanied by decommodifying ones (e.g., much more private-sector involvement in the delivery of public services but also more public investments), the latter either remained subordinated to the former or were endowed with weak coercive power.

The part of *Politicising Commodification* that deals with the post-Covid period is the most engrossing for the reader because it captures a series of twists and turns in the NEG that those who do not engage in such a structured research design would be surprised by. It is theoretically innovative (the term reversed differentiated integration is particularly compelling) and simultaneously subtle and surprising in the empirics. While a large part of scholarship seems at times uniformly jaded about NEG's reactivity to public discontent, this part of the book shows that with regards to labor institutions the EU leaders changed their policy orientation from a commodifying to a decommodifying policy posture. In contrast, on public services, the two Polanyian logics cohabited (tensely) with each other. Also, while business opposition to decommodification through a European framework for minimum wages is to be expected, the book shows that this opposition was eventually overruled by NEG managers. The reason for this was that after Covid, business was not in the position to object, having become entrapped during the Great Financial Crisis in their demand that the EU impose wage cuts and marketize collective bargaining.

Some parts of *Politicising Commodification* invite further considerations. The authors contrast the divisive corporate governance methods that NEG seems to replicate with the universal laws enacted by democratic legislators. Some readers may wonder if the methodological markers of corporate governance do not in fact fit just as much (if not more) with those of international *technocratic* rule instead. Students of international organizations, for example, would find the use of numerical benchmarks to elicit compliance among members as time-honored technocratic, not necessarily corporate practice. The same could be said of deploying ad hoc prescriptions containing both claims to science and discretionary terms to increase the command (and operational autonomy) of the technocratic senior staff. Furthermore, at certain junctures of the book, some neo-Polanyian scholars would perhaps take issue with some of the observable implications of (de)commodification. For example, rather than being a form of decommodification, the simplification of procurement rules may be boilerplate good organization. Additionally, sometimes the standards set for NEG executives seem extremely unrealistic given the known politics of the EU, and one could think of rejoinders from

competent NEG managers that are not always explicitly dealt with in the book. For example, the EU is faulted for its post-Covid NEG focusing on green and digital transitions alongside approved public investments, rather than increasing resources for all public services. To the extent that the post-Covid NEG was about timely countercyclical (Keynesian) fiscal spending, that countercyclicality would be best delivered via shovel-ready projects with high fiscal multipliers rather than diffuse spending on all public services. This narrow menu was certainly problematic from a perspective that would like to see more “social Europe” and a more broadly legitimate policy process, but it was one that could easily be defended on the basis of the Keynesian macroeconomic mechanics of recovery and resilience with which the NEG managers were mandated, and which differed sharply from the neoliberal NEG macroeconomics of the eurocrisis period. Likewise, the climate and digitalization foci made sense from both the perspective of the green agenda the EU had received from the public and from the perspective of EU’s technological decline vis-à-vis the United States and China.

That said, rather than diminish this outstanding book’s merits, these different perspectives and expectations should be read merely as broadening the reach of the book’s unique contributions and merits. *Politicising Commodification* stands to be one of the new classics for anyone interested in how the EU economic governance ticks and is contested across time.

Allies against Commodification

Review by Élodie Béthoux²

Politicising Commodification makes a major contribution to the understanding of contemporary European economic, social, and political dynamics by brilliantly taking up the challenge of jointly examining the commodification agenda of the new economic governance (NEG) of the EU and the conditions of possibility of transnational protest movements in the post-2008 context. Thanks to its novel and heuristic research design, the book convincingly reveals the extent and the coercive power of the commodification agenda. This could have led to the conclusion that labor and workers were doomed to be defeated (e.g., see Huguée, Penissat, and Spire, *Social Class in Europe: New Inequalities in the Old World*, 2020). On the contrary though, without ignoring the difficulties of collective action, Roland Erne, Sabina Stan, Darragh Golden, Imre Szabó, and Vincenzo Maccarrone demonstrate that resisting the commodification of employment relations and public services is not only necessary but also possible (if not always successful) when unions and social movements consider “politicizing Europe across borders” (Szabó, Golden, and Erne, “Why do some labour alliances succeed in politicizing Europe across borders? A comparison of the Right2Water and Fair Transport European Citizens’ initiatives,” 2022). While engaging with the literature on neoliberalism, the book thus offers a welcome step aside.

Examining the course of events over the past 15 years, up until the recent Covid crisis, the book also questions what Social Europe means today. It is a clear invitation to reconsider the expression, which for some has lost its significance a long time ago (Andry, *Social Europe, the Road Not Taken: The Left and European Integration in the Long 1970s*, 2022), and to give

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it a renewed and more sophisticated meaning. This exploration requires the systematic, thorough, and detailed analysis of EU policies and NEG prescriptions, as well as that of their uneven deployment and (counter-)effects. “Unevenness” appears as a core concept and is, in my view, characteristic of the nuanced analysis the book presents. The authors examine these uneven developments across countries (Germany, Italy, Ireland, and Romania), policy areas (employment relations and public services), and sectors (transport, water, healthcare). Significantly, they also do so across time, as they show that NEG prescriptions, when considered at a microlevel and not only as a whole, can in some cases be reversed or go in opposite directions along the commodifying/decommodifying line. This variation is important as it underlines that such “internal contradictions . . . could serve labour movements as crystallisation points for countervailing collective action” (p. 51). The book thus articulates different timelines: It brings a clear-cut analysis of the overarching shift after the 2008 crisis turning point (or later during the Covid crisis), while showing that the dynamics at work are often more complex, on a finer scale.

I read the book as a sociologist of work and industrial relations with a long-standing interest in European employment relations, a constant interest in social dialogue practices and collective bargaining developments, and a current research project on corporate due diligence practices. This first explains why Chapter 6 on EU Governance of Employment Relations and Its Discontent was of primary interest to me. The policy rationale about the need to ensure “the proper functioning” of the EU economy strongly resonates with the call for a “proper functioning of social dialogue” that has been brandished to justify recent labor reforms in France—and that of 2017 on worker representation in particular. Redesigning the structures of worker representation was presented as an answer to the presumed need to “rationalize” and “simplify social dialogue,” to make it more “efficient”—but for whom? More generally, the recurring discourse on the need to “improve social dialogue,” as exemplified in the case of Romania (p. 114), questions the way to define and to measure what a “better” or even a “good” social dialogue would be. In that perspective, too, vertical recommendations, either from the EU or from national governments, are probably not the best option: Unions should clearly have a say.

Second, the authors put forward a thought-provoking idea: The EU’s NEG regime mimics the corporate governance regime that transnational companies use to steer the activities of their subsidiaries and workforce. It is a stimulating contribution to the debate on the relationship between the public and private sectors (Vauchez and France, *The Neoliberal Republic*, 2021) that goes beyond the analysis of privatization and public–private partnerships, which the book also explores in depth in the chapters on transport, water, and healthcare. The comparison is indeed intriguing insofar as it echoes contemporary debates on corporate governance itself (Ferreras, *Firms as Political Entities*, 2017). Ironically, the limits of mimicking corporate governance regime appear even greater when corporate governance is questioned and invited to change, as is the case, for instance, with the recent corporate sustainability due diligence directive.

My final comments concern the place given to actors in the analysis. The authors clearly state that their focus is on the relationship between the structures of the EU’s NEG regime and countervailing collective action, and not on actor-centered factors. The book proves it to be a right choice. But the study draws on a wide variety of sources, among which are more than 160 interviews with national and EU-level policymakers, unionists, and social movements activists. They represent a considerable body of original material. While it undeniably informs the analysis, it would be welcome to have more space given to the voices of these various actors in the text itself. More quotes would give access to their understanding and appreciation of the NEG regime that, depending on the case, they have to define, implement, or fight against. This content could shed light in turn on the tensions that possibly run through their actions as EU

executives, experts, and staff or as workers' and citizens' representatives. The book shows in detail how the shift to the NEG regime has transformed the ways in which union and social-movement protests can occur. In a sociology of work and occupation perspective, it could also be interesting to question whether it has changed the working conditions and practices of EU professionals themselves. Furthermore, among EU actors, members of the European Parliament emerge from the analysis as playing a twofold role that is worth investigating. In addition to their role in the pre-2008 (and recently renewed) making of EU social law, the authors underline their crucial role as allies in social protests against commodification. With the European Parliament renewed in June 2024, it is all the more important to bear this in mind.

The EU Public Policy Dimension

Review by Martin Rhodes³

Politicising Commodification by Roland Erne, Sabina Stan, Darragh Golden, Imre Szabó, and Vincenzo Maccarrone (henceforth Erne et al.) is an extraordinarily ambitious piece of work. The core argument is that although EU governance since the financial crisis has expanded to new policy areas, with greater interventionist effect using conditionality requirements to promote less state and more markets across Member States, this process has provoked a countervailing mobilization by the European labor movement to politicize the commodification thrust.

The book's broad scope is to be admired, covering as it does EU governance—or rather new economic governance (NEG) as the authors call it—in social and labor market policies, as well as their impact on national employment relations and public services across three sectors in four countries. The depth and thoroughness of the analysis (the exploration in detail of EU policies and their orientation, as well as their impact in terms of commodification or decommodification in national settings) are also exemplary. In the following *critique raisonnée*, which focuses on the EU public policy dimension of the book, I want to raise some questions about the analysis without detracting in any respect from its many qualities.

The choice of Germany, Italy, Ireland, and Romania as case studies is meant to—and does—provide variation regarding the cross-national orientation and impact of EU NEG policies. But the criteria for selecting these four countries is never entirely clear, which deprives the analysis of some analytical clarity as it proceeds. The countries do seem to be chosen according to their “location in the NEG's policy enforcement regime” (as Erne et al. refer to it on pp. 297 and 304). But greater precision would have flowed from specifying formally and explicitly the two key dimensions on which the countries vary: small versus large (we know the latter are better able to influence EU policymaking) and their specific location on the policy enforcement regime, that is, those subject to Troika or EU-IMF cooperative intervention (Ireland and Romania), an “implicit conditionality regime” (Italy), or a no conditionality regime (Germany). After all, as the authors make clear in other respects, NEG is not an undifferentiated phenomenon. Second, it is always good to know who the opposition is, and the analysis could have been strengthened by taking on more arguments from the substantial literature regarding EU policy shifts and their consequences. The only real foil for Erne et al.'s argument is Zeitlin and Vanhercke (“Socializing the European Semester,” 2018), whose argument for a

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“progressive socialization” of the European Semester after 2011 they rightly critique. But they could have also engaged with arguments regarding, for example, the role of ideas (ordoliberal vs. social investment) in the evolution and phasing of EU and national government policies; the scope for national engagement with (and shaping of) supranational policymaking; the actual stringency of, and compliance with, EU policy instruments; and the extent to which there is a consistent shift, as Erne et al. claim, toward greater commodification in EU country-specific recommendations (CSRs) in the pre-Covid period. Hass et al. (“Economic and fiscal policy coordination after the crisis,” 2020), among others, would contest the latter claim, and the authors could have contested their position in turn. They have plenty of evidence with which to do so.

Moving on to conceptual issues, the use of “commodification–decommodification” to examine the direction of EU and national policy shifts allows the authors to develop some penetrating insights. They map in great detail market-making or public goods preservation in response to EU policy across their countries and sectors, which is a major and novel achievement. But it also has some limitations, of which Erne et al. seem to be aware when they state that “broad-brush, macro-theories of neoliberalism and commodification” cannot explain everything when it comes to wage bargaining (p. 64) and transport policy (p. 176). A discussion up front of what broad-brush macro-theories of this kind can and cannot explain would have been helpful. I was not entirely convinced, for example, by all aspects of their “commodifying policy script” argument in which even decommodifying policies are insufficiently so if linked to the dominant “commodifying policy script informing most NEG prescriptions” (p. 156). Again, engaging with those such as Hass et al. (2020), who have a quite different take on whether the EU’s post-crisis economic governance promotes “more or less state,” could have helped shore up or nuance the commodification argument.

Next, Erne et al.’s notion that the EU’s NEG regime “mimicks the corporate governance mechanism of transnational corporations (TNCs), which steer their subsidiaries’ activities using whipsawing tactics, coercive comparisons, and subsidiary-specific ad hoc interventions” (p. 319) is intriguing but raises several questions. There is undoubtedly an element of TNC management in post-crisis EU governance, but the point is conceptually underdeveloped. After all, an important feature of the TNC hierarchical system is the focus on strategic decision-making at higher levels and the delegation of tactical tasks, to accommodate local conditions, to lower ones—which the EU’s NEG system quite closely resembles.

Perhaps a more appropriate comparison would be the conditionality systems used not just by international organizations (the IMF and World Bank) but also by other federal systems, which the EU is beginning to resemble. In all of them, compliance by subsidiary units with central funding conditionality is always an issue, and compliance tends to decline as conditionality becomes more demanding. Erne et al. do distinguish between the coercive power of different EU instruments, contrasting Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) for countries under bailout programs with weaker Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) or Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure (MIP)–related prescriptions, as well as their uneven impact. But as we know from other studies of conditionality, under EU enlargement, cohesion, and structural funding, domestic buy-in is always important and national political elites (whose role is somewhat underplayed in this book) will actively resist or actively promote external policy conditions for their own purposes. Supposedly coercive powers are often weak in practice, as revealed, for example, by the failure of many parts of the reform program advocated by the EU/IMF for Greece. From this perspective, the TNC analogy loses some of its strength.

Downplaying the role of national political elites leads to some mischaracterization of the post-Covid Next Generation EU (NGEU) governance regime. Erne et al. (p. 314) argue that the latter gives the Commission the coercive powers of MoUs as used by the Troika for bailout

countries during the debt crisis, when in fact reform conditions related to NGEU funding are negotiated (sometimes extensively) with Member States, which formulate National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) and set the targets the Commission monitors. As Miró, Natili, and Schelkle (“Money makes the world go round,” forthcoming 2024) argue, while under the NGEU, “adding fiscal capacity to the European Semester enhances the Commission’s hierarchical power . . . the need to ensure member states’ loyalty leaves room for national executives to insist on their priorities.” Again, a greater engagement with the literature would have forced Erne et al. to combat such positions and strengthen their own.

Nevertheless, even without considering its contributions to the European industrial relations literature or that on transnational social movements, *Politicising Commodification* adds a great deal to our understanding of EU public policy developments over the past two decades. It will be required reading for all scholars working in this field.

The “Managerialising” of the European Union

Review by Miguel Martínez Lucio⁴

The integration of the European Union (EU), both economically and socially, has been an important development in the construction of transnational regulation and governance. Over time, the emergence of a new economic governance (NEG) based on forms of performance evaluation and information gathering in relation to nation states has become an important tool for the coordination of policy implementation and goal congruence within the EU. *Politicising Commodification: European Governance and Labour Politics from the Financial Crisis to the Covid Emergency* is important because it sees such a model as taking inspiration not from the public sphere but from the private sphere of transnational corporations; something that is happening in a context of increasing support from the EU’s higher echelons for greater commodification of public services and labor markets. Many studies critical of the EU’s neoliberal leanings—regardless of the semantics of its supposed social dimension—do not always outline the broader policymaking architecture of the EU and how these changes are taking place. Hence, the book is a corrective in that it broadens understanding of the pre-existing problems. There seems to be an increasing *democratic deficit* within the EU that has accelerated with the financial crisis of 2008 and the pandemic crisis of 2020. It is not because of a lack of good intentions or forms of social intervention, but rather that, increasingly, a long-term objective is to ensure greater commodification (to use that Polanyian-inspired term) and greater market-oriented national coherence between states. The authors, Roland Erne, Sabina Stan, Darragh Golden, Imre Szabó, and Vincenzo Maccarrone, observe in detail such developments across various public services and labor-relations issues. They also show how organized labor seems, in effect, to be trapped in a politics of mobilization that is framed by arguing and acting against reduction of the public sphere and collective rights, when, in fact, the focus has gone beyond such social democratic sensibilities. Although the book outlines how social movements and trade unions are shifting their struggles in a more nuanced manner, especially in areas such as health services, it also points out that they seem trapped in a classic model of mobilization. Part of the problem with the EU debate in industrial relations is that it

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often remains wedded to the subtleties of joint or state regulation in relation to workers' rights and working conditions and cannot effectively see the broader economic picture.

Note that such longer wave changes from horizontal to more vertical corporate-like approaches, within a context of a more intensified commodification process, are sustained by a range of broader shifts. We need to be sensitive to questions of policy in a more political—perhaps even partisan—manner to complete this picture. The first reflection is the role of the ideological and the representation of European workers (especially those in the EU's south). During the response to the financial crisis, the underpinning narrative, utilized to legitimate neoliberal labor markets in countries such as Spain, emphasized racial stereotyping in terms of the so-called rigidities, lack of innovation, low productivity, and general complacency of the workforce (see Fernández Rodríguez and Martínez Lucio, "Narratives, myths and prejudice in understanding employment systems", 2013; Fernández Rodríguez and Martínez Lucio, *Work and Employment Relations in Southern Europe*, 2023). This narrative was not only a useful tool to justify greater deregulation of the labor market in the second decade of the millennium, it was also a vital component of a vertical and hierarchical view of Europe that rarely considered the challenges of the European south and other peripheral dimensions. These approaches were substantially inspired by the neoliberal politics of the now non-EU member, the United Kingdom (see also Koukiadaki et al., "Continuity and change in joint regulation in Europe", 2016).

The second addition one could make is the failure of the EU to systematically invest in the capacities of key European social actors, such as trade unions and social movements, beyond elite structures at the level of the European Commission. Some have also argued that at times there has been a lack of innovation and even indifference within parts of the European trade union movement on labor market issues from a solidaristic perspective and the broader European project (Prosser, *European Labour Movements in Crisis*, 2018). While this may sound a bit extreme, the failure to go beyond the bare minimum in industrial relations, and the inability to actually invest in trade unions more systematically in institutional and financial terms, means that the capacity to respond is often compromised. The book rightly questions the obsession among some academics with highlighting *institutional* dynamics of EU political processes, but the *de facto* marginalization or tokenistic institutional integration within the European project of key social actors is a significant issue.

Finally, the third point relates to the ongoing crisis of social democracy and the shift in the political terrain that has occurred in recent decades. That is not to say that social democracy has been totally weakened by a new xenophobic right and a more critical radical left that question—albeit in different ways—the social consensus of the postwar period. However, one should take a step further back into the 1980s and 1990s and note the way the language and policies of the social democratic parties of Francois Mitterrand, Felipe González, Tony Blair, and others began to be framed by the content and obsessions of New Right discourses on privatization, labor rights, and the need to indulge the new managerialism and its performative obsessions (Finlayson, *Making Sense of New Labour*, 2003; Smith, *The Left's Dirty Job: The Politics of Industrial Restructuring in France and Spain*, 1998). To some extent we can see this limited approach in the new post-Covid wave of re-regulation in certain countries, with its focus, primarily, on reversals of some aspects of labor market and collective bargaining de-regulation, but not on interventions or direct and expansive public ownership, so that the new progressive politics have been framed by neoliberalism in curious and indirect ways (Fernández Rodríguez and Martínez Lucio, 2023). This political dimension is something the book has explained and highlighted in terms of policy projects and the way processes of commodification and decommodification are becoming more subtle, for example, the push for marketization ran parallel to the suspension of austerity measures during this period according to the authors.

However, these contradictions are providing some scope for what the authors call *countervailing collective action*.

We need to realize that the nature of the political dimension systematically frames the inability to reimagine the social economy of Europe and the role of workers in an even more explicit manner within the EU. Increasingly, as the book makes clear, this delineates the EU's governance systems as it copies those in the international private sector. The book brings to the fore a new and engaging way of understanding and rethinking the neoliberal problem and will no doubt be a point of reference in the endeavors to understand the options available to progressive forces in the EU.

Politicising Commodification: A Response to Ban, Béthoux, Rhodes, and Martínez Lucio

Roland Erne, Sabina Stan, Darragh Golden, Imre Szabó, and Vincenzo Maccarrone⁵

Most scholarly research espouses the following low-risk formula, which usually promises decent research results. First, academics situate themselves in a specific disciplinary field and then approach their research subject from a particular angle, for example, European public policymaking. Then, they pick a questionable argument from the most recent literature. Finally, academic writers usually present critical empirical evidence in their publications that ought to force the authors' intellectual sparring partners to change their argument. This pattern of academic writing frequently leads to robust results, which explains why PhD supervisors usually encourage their PhD students—for very good, practical reasons—to follow it.

As noted by our critics, however, the underlying pattern of *Politicising Commodification* differs from that path in terms of both its broad interdisciplinary focus and its bold, and thus also very risky, intellectual ambition. Our research is indeed an example of the “high risk–high gain” approach, which the European Research Council (ERC) is sponsoring to achieve either paradigm-shifting breakthroughs in basic research, or great failure.

To mitigate any grandiose failure in achieving any paradigm-shifting breakthroughs, in our six-year ERC research project we have gathered empirical evidence that might prompt scholars from various disciplinary and theoretical approaches to reconsider their arguments in their fields, as our critics, who come from a variety of disciplines, have acknowledged.

In *EU public policymaking*, for example, our findings falsify the arguments about the alleged “progressive socialization” of the EU's new economic governance (NEG) prescriptions, as demonstrated in Chapter 11 of our book. The chapter outlines the predominately commodifying policy orientation of the EU's quantitative and—most notably also—qualitative

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NEG policy prescriptions for Germany, Italy, Ireland, and Romania in two intersectoral policy areas (employment relations and public services) and three sectors (transport, water, and healthcare) from 2009 to 2019.

In *EU law*, we challenge the doctrinarian view on the non-constraining nature of the NEG regime. Our detailed empirical analysis shows that NEG prescriptions can be coercive (and not only in the case of the harsh conditionalities outlined in a memorandum of an EU-IMF bailout program) despite the formally non-legally binding Council Regulations, which EU executives (i.e., the European Commission and Council of national finance ministers) are using to issue their country-specific NEG prescriptions. In many cases, the packages of EU laws that institutionalized the NEG regime after 2011 even empower the Commission and Council to issue much more effective sanctions for non-complying countries, depending on their location in the NEG enforcement regime, compared with those included in rulings of the Court of Justice under the EU's infringement procedure, as we have shown in the book's methodological Chapters 4 and 5, empirical Chapters 6 to 10 on NEG's 2009–2019 period, and Chapter 12 on the post-Covid period.

In *EU politics*, our book challenges state-centered theories, which state that EU integration is shaped by the tension between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism. We have shown that this classical distinction prevents us from understanding how the EU's NEG regime really works, as outlined in Chapter 2 of our book. The NEG regime is based on country-specific policy prescriptions that are drafted jointly by the supranational Commission and the intergovernmental Council of national finance ministers (without the consent of national parliaments, the European Parliament, or national/European social partners). The major conflict line is thus not between national and EU institutions, but between actors that work in different policy areas, use different decision-making methods, and pursue different social, economic, or monetary policy rationales and interests. Accordingly, we have given our book the title *Politicising Commodification* rather than *Politicising Europe*, as the collaboration of networks of national and supranational economic and political executives in the drafting of NEG prescriptions requires us to analyze EU politics from a material policy-orientation perspective rather than the usual institutional national–EU axis perspective.

We also challenge the *national varieties of capitalism, unionism, and welfare state* literatures in comparative politics, social policy, and employment relations. Although varieties of capitalism and labor politics scholars do acknowledge horizontal market pressures created by economic globalization and the making of the EU's Single Market and Monetary Union, they still assume the autonomy of national policymakers. These assumptions, however, have been seriously questioned by the EU's shift to the NEG regime after the 2008 crisis, despite the country-specific deployment of its NEG prescriptions.

Our book also contributes to debates in the field of *EU integration studies*. Whereas scholars of “differentiated integration” correctly perceived the use of country-specific EU rules (e.g., national opt-outs from EU legislation) as a tool that accommodates economic, social, and cultural heterogeneity among member states, our analysis has shown that the EU's country-specific NEG prescriptions have been informed by an overarching policy script, which aimed to force countries that lagged behind to catch up in the commodification of labor and public services in a particular area or sector. We thus coined the term *reversed differentiated integration* to describe EU executives' use of country-specific prescriptions to pressure reluctant states to accept policies seeking to boost the convergence of national policies along the lines of an overarching EU policy script.

Finally, and perhaps most important, our detailed analysis of the important changes to the NEG regime introduced by EU policymakers after the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic shows that the “study of policies must include conflict around and protest against those policies,

and their impact in turn on the policymakers,” as one of our first readers, Colin Crouch, has been saying.

This approach, however, requires us to cross the rigid boundaries of disciplinary and theoretical traditions to achieve the intellectual freedom that allows us to produce our own distinctive approach based on the new empirical insights produced by new social realities that cannot be easily explained by the prevailing macro theories. Who would have thought, for example, that EU leaders would suspend the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) in spring 2020; *nota bene*, by means of a simple Commission Communication, that is, an instrument that is even weaker than a Council Recommendation according to conventional legal wisdom? After all, EU scholars from very different intellectual traditions agreed that suspending the SGP rules would be impossible, either because the SGP rules were deeply ingrained in the discursive practices of national and EU executives (as Vivien Schmidt, a discursive institutionalist scholar, wrote in her 2020 book on NEG) or because of the “constitutional” nature of neoliberalism in the EU, as incidentally both orthodox Marxists and ordoliberalists have been arguing ever since the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993.

To be able to understand the “silent revolution” in EU governance—to quote the former president of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso—witnessed after the global financial crisis, the plethora of countervailing protest movements triggered by it, and their feedback effects on EU governance, we need to adopt a novel analytical perspective that goes beyond the existing macro theories of neoliberalism. We thus implicitly mimicked the method of Karl Polanyi, the Austro-Hungarian social scientist, who based his analysis of past socioeconomic great transformations on concepts drawn from anthropological, sociological, economic, legal, and political analytical traditions.

This, however, does not make us “Polanyists,” as one could assume given our use of the commodification–decommodification axis as a clear-cut methodological device to assess the policy orientation of the EU’s NEG prescriptions. We do indeed pursue a distinctive approach that does not assume that commodifying interventions inevitably trigger countermovements by “society.” Our analysis has shown that the EU’s shift to more vertical commodifying policy interventions triggered many trade-union and social-movement protests, including transnationally, especially by public-sector workers and users of water and healthcare services. Conversely, we show that NEG’s country-specific methodology mimics the corporate governance regime used by the HQs of transnational corporations to govern their subsidiaries and their workers by supranational key performance indicators and site-specific ad hoc interventions. Similarly, NEG’s country-specific methodology also puts workers and citizens from different countries in competition with one another, unless they see that they are facing a common threat, namely an overarching supranational commodification script.

We thus present findings that are crucial for the prospects of democracy in the European Union, as labor politics is essential in framing the struggles regarding the direction of NEG along a commodification–decommodification axis rather than a national–EU axis. To shed light on corresponding processes at the EU level, we upscale insights on the historical role that labor and social movements have played in the development of democracy and welfare states. It is thus great to see that *Politicising Commodification* has sparked the interest of leading scholars across a wide range of academic disciplines, national backgrounds, and scholarly approaches. We are very grateful to Cornel Ban, Élodie Béthoux, Martin Rhodes, and Miguel Martínez Lucio for their engagement with our book and hope that trade unionists, social movement activists, and everyone else interested in shifting Europe toward a union of social justice will also find it inspiring.