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Global Turmoil and Conflicting Hierarchies in Europe

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Global turmoil and conflicting hierarchies: An introduction

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Editorial

In the present issue of Intersections, devoted to the theme of shifting hierarchies of our times, our aim is to highlight how the absence, contestation, or unacknowledged presence of hierarchical relations fuel conflicts that contribute to the global turmoil we currently experience in politics and governance, as well as in economic and social life. For social scientists, it is evident that hierarchy is in operation wherever we look, and as recent research and reflection on the topic spell out, hierarchy is about much more than inequality and oppression. While in the liberal political tradition society is modelled as the association of individual, autonomous, equal political subjects, and hierarchical human relations seem to be the antithesis of just that; in many cultural contexts around the world, hierarchical relations are valued as components of a just social order and a moral good (Haynes & Hickel, 2018, p. 2).

Hierarchy, recalling the Greek origins of the word, once denoted the idea of a sacred order – an arrangement in which the laws of the universe and those governing human life stemmed from the same immutable sources. Such worldviews were characteristic of all traditional societies and are still cultivated by our religious traditions. However, the scientific revolution put an end to the security provided by the authority of religion and self-reflection and 'thinking for oneself' have become hallmarks of maturity. Beginning in early modernity, individuals were increasingly tasked with the freedom and responsibility to find their place in life and shape both themselves and society to the best of their knowledge and intentions. This task has proved to be both daunting and liberating. The loss of belief in the legitimacy of traditional hierarchies has erased long-standing privileges and servitude, but with it went the security of following inherited patterns and roles, and even more than that.

If one would like to understand what has been lost and why hierarchical human relations could still have an appeal, a very good place to start is the work of the French anthropologist, Louis Dumont. Dumont dedicated much of his life to studying and comparing the value systems of diverse cultures. He analysed the nature of hierarchy both as a social formation and as an ideational structure and summarised his findings in a monograph, Homo Hierarchicus: the Caste System and its Implications (1970).

Dumont's central thesis in his lengthy monograph was that traditional Indian social hierarchy was the manifest structure of a holistic ideational order.

He stressed that a holistic representation of the world would be necessarily hierarchical, since, in such an outlook, the purpose of the parts 'organically' follows from the purpose of the whole; and then, as long as the various units differ from one another the way persons do, their connection and contribution to the whole will also differ, which inherently gives rise to hierarchy. In a subchapter of Homo Hierarchicus entitled The necessity of hierarchy Dumont employs Parson's arguments about concerted action to substantiate his claim. Parson defines action as activity oriented towards the attainment of goals, and thus involves selective processes relative to those goals. The implication is that, seen in their relation to the attainable goals, all the elements of the processes involved will be evaluated. The elements of the processes could be the necessary materials, the elementary units of action, but also the persons carrying out the actions. All these elements will be evaluated and, as a result, ranked. A further implication of Talcott's thought is that social stability will necessitate integrating the evaluations of the component units into a shared value system (Talcott, 1953, A revised analytical approach to the theory of social stratification). And when an entire society has its values integrated with the help of a grand narrative that organises all the members' purposeful activities into an integrated whole, then the result is a hierarchically organised structure (Dumont, 1970, pp. 19–20).

Dumont's analysis of the traditional holistic outlook has one more feature that differentiates it drastically from the present mindset, and this is the degree to which a society is self-reflexive about its own evaluating mechanisms. In cases where tradition provides an outlook where everything already possesses a place and rank in the cosmos, the value of a thing is embedded in its idea, or conceptual representation, and this Dumont calls a 'value-idea'. To demonstrate how this works, Dumont describes how the hierarchical organisation of parts into a whole is conventionally represented by the image of a living organism, in which the representation of any particular organ is bound up with a particular value. He then asks us to think of our left and right hands and shows how the evaluation of the right being 'better' comes so 'naturally' that we are barely conscious of actively creating the ranking (Dumont, 1980, p. 301).

The second step in Dumont's project was to contrast the ideology of the traditional hierarchical orders with that of modern Western society, founded upon the principle of equal liberty. Dumont observes that although our modern state gains legitimacy by providing an order where each citizen's autonomy is equally protected, it is nevertheless, almost subconsciously, bound up with a holistic image captured in the Fable of the Bees by Mandeville, which teaches us that by pursuing their own interests individuals will, through the 'magical hand' of the market, contribute to the greater good of the entire community (Dumont, 1977, pp. 61–62).

Dumont did not begin with psychoanalytic assumptions but from anthropological inquiry into the value systems of particular cultures; yet he ultimately addressed the non-conscious dimensions of culture. He maintained that although cultural value systems vary, they all fall within 'the human predicament'— the range of possibilities available to Homo sapiens living in groups. This was how he put it:

The unity of mankind, postulated and also verified (slowly and painfully) by anthropology, sets limits to the variation (of value configurations). Each particular configuration of ideas and values is contained with all others in a universal figure of which it is a partial expression. Yet this universal figure is so complex that it cannot be de-

scribed, but only vaguely imagined as a kind of sum integral of all concrete configurations (Dumont, 1980, p. 311).

Dumont's broadly naturalistic anthropological outlook underlies his distinctive comparative method for discerning the 'universal matrix'— the universal constellation of values that encompasses all variations. This requires mapping not only the explicit values of a community but also its unconscious features (Dumont, 1980, p. 311).

Thus, if a culture's ideo-normative setting extols autonomy and self-sufficiency, the significance of interdependence remains unconscious; if it emphasises conformity, rank, and discipline, the desire to do things one's own way lingers beneath the surface. In the end nature will set limits, even if those limits are not known, and hierarchically organized societies somewhere in their configurations will contain a principle of equality, e.g. in the Indian caste system although the dominant mindset was communitarian, everyone had the option to turn their back to the order of the world and live as a 'renouncer', an individual outside the ranks of society (in the analyses of Dumont the Buddha was such), whereas western formally egalitarian systems are fraught with hierarchical structures (class, power, racism) (Dumont, 1970, p. 233).

Another way to put what would also follow from Dumont's conclusions is that no culture can extinguish the manifold human potential. This is what the Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Zizek, argues in his latest book, Against Progress (2024). Zizek seems to pick up the thread where Dumont left it. His book unapologetically attacks the fantasy of progress as a linear process that yields constant gains and entails no significant loss. Rejecting linear conceptions of progress, Zizek insists that progress makes sense only as 'the inner development of a system, the gradual actualisation of its potential' (Žižek, 2024, p. 17). Everything, therefore, depends on which system serves as the point of reference. His analysis in his essay on Authority pushes us to consider how the desire to belong to a community leads people to treat their own community as the desired site of progress (Žižek, 2024, pp. 13–14). Such an exclusivist notion of development will be coupled with the fantasy of the perfect community. This community can only fail due to the intruding other, leading to a situation where:

what appears as hindrance to societies full identity with itself is actually its positive condition: by transposing onto X (the Jew) the role of the foreign body which introduces disintegration and antagonism into the social organism, the fantasy-image of society as consistent, harmonious whole is rendered possible (Žižek, 2024, p. 73).

Condemning such fantasies, Zizek affirms passionately that 'in order to survive we need a radical rearrangement of our entire way of life towards some form of global solidarity and cooperation' (Žižek, 2024, p. 19). At the same time, it may come as a surprise that he simultaneously insists on the local and multiple nature of 'progresses', leaving the reader to ponder how these diverse local systems are to submit to the global imperative of survival. What Zizek does emphasise, though, is that the idea of progress in Western thought has traditionally been tied to the ideal of freedom. And if this venture has produced grievances, such as the loss of ontological security, of acknowledged interdependence, of the idea of hierarchy as holism, or the loss of responsibility for doing one's own share in the task of enabling planetary survival, then the notion of progress has to be redefined to tackle all these losses.

Zizek is hardly alone in the critical rethinking of progress. As noted at the outset of this introduction, the anthropologists contributing to the volume, Hierarchy and Value, also argue for the need to redefine our conceptions of freedom and progress.

Invoking Charles Taylor's Sources of the Self, anthropological research affirms the insight that agency — the capacity to make meaningful choices — depends on a worldview. Agency and freedom can only be developed through participation in a community's conception of a meaningful life, even if nowadays this takes the form of being exposed to several competing conceptions. From the perspective of freedom, meaningful hierarchy could be an enabling factor for making the most of one's potential, as well as a hindrance (Haynes & Hickel, 2018, pp. 5–7).

As opposed to Dumont, Haynes and Hickel depart from the definition of hierarchy as holism and as 'encompassment' — the phenomenon when lower, contrasting categories are subsumed within a higher, comprehensive one. Instead, they assert that hierarchy as a structure of ideo-normative values and as a kind of social form need not go together. They believe that a great number of social relations based on asymmetry of power and difference in rank, such as clientelism or seniority, could be satisfactorily analysed without positing an all-encompassing ideological structure.

The term *hierarchy* is also crucial in international relations. In *Hierarchy in International Relations*, David A. Lake proposes investigating hierarchy among states from a relational understanding of authority (Lake, 2009, p. 3). Whereas political philosophers starting from a legalistic conception of authority conceive of international relations as unfolding between formally equal states possessing indivisible sovereignty — limited only by legal institutions of their own creation and thus constituting a fundamentally anarchic system — a relational approach acknowledges and explains empirical patterns of domination and subordination. In a relational approach, the authority to rule stems from the ruler's capacity to uphold a secure order, and subordinate states accept such authority to benefit from the order it provides, in a logic analogous to the social contract in domestic politics. Subordinate states forfeit aspects of their sovereignty in exchange for peaceful order. Once sovereignty is understood as practically divisible, and the authority of dominant states as stemming from their ability to uphold a secure local order, new and important patterns of international relations emerge (Lake, 2009, pp. 1–4).

In sum, what we can learn from recent studies about value systems and social hierarchies at the local and global levels is that, rather than seeing hierarchy as inherently good or bad, we could ask many questions about its nature and effects. Can hierarchy serve the public good? Which hierarchies make sense in terms of personal well-being and public welfare, and which do not? Can a context-specific use of the concept also take local components into account, without losing sight of global structures?

The special issue "Global turmoil and conflicting hierarchies" has brought together scholarly contributions exploring the nature and causes of these phenomena, from researchers based in various countries and working across a wide range of academic disciplines. Despite the diversity of methodological approaches, regional foci, and theoretical frameworks represented, the articles in this issue share a common concern with the concept of hierarchy as it manifests across different societal domains. This shared focus allows the contributions to be grouped along three principal thematic axes, each of which reflects a distinct dimension of hierarchical organisation and its implications.

The first axis focuses on concepts and includes contributions by András Schweitzer, Andrew Richard Ryder, and Áron Tábor. These authors all address recent theoretical developments and global challenges that call for a renewed conceptual engagement with hierarchy. The second axis observes non-Western cases of contested hierarchies,

featuring studies by Márta Mónika Wollner, Karunanithi Gopalakrishnan, and Sumit Kumar, who offer ethnographic and historical perspectives that provincialise Western assumptions about stratification and value. Finally, the third axis focuses on social and policy practices of everyday hierarchies, with contributions by Judit Durst and colleagues, Imen Khemakhem, and Dwi Wahyu Handayani and colleagues, that turn to the lived and institutionalised dimensions of inequality, examining how hierarchical relations are negotiated in contemporary social and policy settings. Together, these contributions offer valuable insights about ongoing transformations in global hierarchies.

András Schweitzer's article Democracy dies in conceptual darkness. How the innocuous left-right metaphor leads to deceptive ideational hierarchies and democratic backsliding investigates how political ideas shape democratic erosion, using Hungary as an emblematic case. Once a regional pioneer in democratisation and later in autocratisation, Hungary illustrates how ideas can drive both processes. From a social constructivist perspective, Schweitzer analyses academic and political narratives of Hungary's post-1989 transformation and how they link political ideologies to democracy. He identifies two narrative groups: mainstream liberal accounts that emphasise democratic decline starting with the second Fidesz government after 2010, and critical anti-capitalist or sovereigntist narratives that claim earlier democratic deficits caused by the liberal ideological project. These narratives, he argues, construct hierarchies that either elevate liberalism or place nationalism above all other ideologies. To counter this, Schweitzer proposes a new model that flattens these hierarchies and positions liberalism, socialism, conservatism, and nationalism as equal. Grounded in the French Revolution ideals – liberty, equality, fraternity – he links them to liberalism, socialism, and nationalism, which together safeguard pluralism, justice, and cohesion, and adds conservatism's emphasis on stability. The resulting tetrahedron presents all four ideologies as equally essential democratic pillars.

Andrew Richard Ryder's A new Social Europe: A Polányian response to turmoil and authoritarianism argues that Europe's current political and economic turmoil stems from a historical reversal of social hierarchy: the inversion of the relationship between the economy and society. During the post-war period of 'embedded liberalism', society and democratic institutions held authority over markets. With the rise of neoliberalism, markets became 'disembedded', empowering financial elites and technocratic bodies like the ECB and IMF, as starkly revealed during the eurozone crisis, when austerity was imposed at the expense of social welfare. Ryder shows how authoritarian populism exploits the resulting grievances: while aligned with neoliberal economic forces, populist leaders redirect anger toward cultural out-groups and claim to embody the 'true will' of the people, creating new political and cultural hierarchies. He calls for a 'New Social Europe' in which social and democratic objectives once again take precedence over market imperatives.

Áron Tábor's analysis Caught in a war of identities: Domestic polarization and the loss of U.S. consensus on the Ukraine conflict examines how a bipartisan consensus in the United States over aid to Ukraine collapsed within two years of Russia's full-scale invasion. In early 2022, Democrats and Republicans alike regarded Russia as a major threat and supported unprecedented levels of military and financial assistance to Ukraine. By the time of the 2024 election campaign, however, this consensus had eroded, with public opinion and elite rhetoric revealing a widening partisan divide. Tábor argues that this breakdown was not simply about differing

cost–benefit assessments of U.S. foreign policy action, but rather the result of an overspill of domestic identity polarisation into foreign policy. Tábor connects two concepts: ontological security and affective polarisation. Ontological security suggests that both states and social groups require a stable sense of Self, and when that identity is threatened, anxieties are externalised into (foreign) policy. Affective polarisation, meanwhile, highlights how U.S. politics has become increasingly driven by partisan identities and animosity toward the out-group rather than policy preferences. When foreign-policy debates are framed in identity terms, Tábor suggests, these two dynamics interact to produce especially sharp divisions. What began as a bipartisan consensus thus shifted into the polarisation effect described by John Zaller, where higher public awareness translated into growing partisan division. The analysis underscores how the resulting lack of a foreign policy consensus severely hinders effective action and weakens the U.S.' position as the global hegemon, thereby eroding current global hierarchies from within.

Márta Mónika Wollner's article Purity/impurity in Islam: Shifting hierarchies between religious and secular attitudes in the case of female genital mutilation / cutting-khifad in Egypt is an in-depth study of how trends within Sunni Muslim religious legal interpretation reflect changing attitudes towards the hierarchical relation between science and faith, and the reconsideration of women's well-being. Examining dozens of fatwas in relation to the ongoing practices, Wollner concludes that while life-determining choices in Egyptian society are still based on religious instruction, the content of such instruction changes as religious scholars and lawmakers incorporate standard scientific evidence on women's health into the construction of religious norms, such as the principle of causing no harm. Wollner likens such a progressive interpretation of the sacred texts to the idea of the Living Constitution and shows how such an interpretation is tied to the desire for modernisation and concern for women's health. At the same time, Wollner highlights how, within fundamentalist Islam, competing narratives emerge that threaten recent legal achievements. Still, even fundamentalist sources endeavour to back up their opinions with scientific reasoning attesting to the rising status of science within the fundamentalist community, as well.

Karunanithi Gopalakrishnan's article, A caste group placed in the lowest rung of social hierarchy in India: Dalits in the past and at present, offers a comprehensive examination of the Dalit communities within the broader framework of hierarchical social organisation in India. Anchored in the concept of caste as a deeply entrenched social hierarchy, the paper explores the historical and contemporary experiences of Dalits, who have long occupied the most marginalised position within this stratified structure. The article critically engages with the caste system, with a particular attention to the concept of 'untouchability', a key mechanism through which hierarchical exclusion has been perpetuated. The paper further examines the emergence and evolution of Dalit movements, highlighting their role in fostering political awareness and collective mobilisation, as well as the constitutional and legal provisions aimed at safeguarding the rights of Dalits, with a focus on affirmative action policies intended to improve their educational attainment and employment opportunities. The article concludes with a sobering assessment: despite constitutional safeguards and various social reforms, the caste-based hierarchical order remains resilient and may continue to adapt and endure within Indian society.

Sumit Kumar's contribution, Decolonising Panchayats in India: Exploring Gand-

hian decentralisation as a mechanism for grassroots involvement, examines why India, despite its long tradition of local governance through the so-called panchayats (five-member village elder assemblies), remains a highly centralised democracy. Kumar argues that colonialism disrupted indigenous institutions like the panchayats, replacing their participatory and conciliatory practices with hierarchical, representative, and often corrupt structures. This has led to declining citizen participation, continued elite capture, and the persistence of discriminatory practices. Using postcolonial theory, Kumar explains how colonisation not only displaced local governance but also reshaped Indian politics to mimic hierarchical Western structures, meanwhile corrupting democratic ideals and embedding systemic corruption and alienation into Indian society. Kumar suggests a Gandhian vision of Gram Swaraj (village self-government) as an alternative: a decentralised, non-violent, participatory democracy; a federation of small village republics where power radiates outward from the individual in concentric circles of governance. The article concludes that decolonising panchayats requires reviving their participatory and conciliatory ethos and harmonising indigenous practices with modern democratic frameworks. This kind of change cannot come from the state. Instead, it would mean empowering individuals first, then radiating power outward to institutions – reversing the hierarchical, state-devolved model currently in place.

The article by Judit Durst, Gergő Pulay, and Balázs Gosztonyi, Hierarchies of clientelism, brokerage, and indebtedness in illiberal Hungary, examines hierarchical dependency relations in contemporary rural Hungary. Situated within a broader collective ethnographic project, the study develops a conceptual framework to analyse the forms of exchange relations – particularly clientelism, brokerage, and indebtedness – that structure everyday life under conditions of economic precarity and political illiberalism. The authors argue that these hierarchical relationships are not merely functional or instrumental, but also deeply embedded in local moral economies, where personal favours are exchanged for access to impersonal public services. Working-class and marginalised individuals make economic choices that are deeply entangled with hierarchies of power and obligation. In these settings, clientelist relations, often mediated by local brokers, serve both as a mechanism of survival and as a means through which existing social hierarchies are maintained or reconfigured. The study reveals how such dependencies are not static but evolve dynamically in response to broader socio-economic transformations. Durst et al. argue that the ongoing restructuring of Hungarian capitalism – three decades after the end of state socialism – has not led to the erosion of hierarchical dependencies but rather to their diversification. The authors conclude that these reconfigured hierarchies of dependence represent a key mechanism of social reproduction in rural Hungary, sustaining inequalities while also providing a fragile form of security in a context marked by declining welfare provision and weakening institutional support.

Imen Khemakhem's *Policy monitoring and power hierarchies in Hungarian Roma integration: The Roma Civil Monitor, the Hungarian government and the European Commission* analyse how hierarchical relations shape Roma inclusion strategies in Hungary. The analysis examines the interactions between the Hungarian government, the European Commission (EC), and Roma civil society organisations (CSOs), using the Roma Civil Monitor (RCM) as a case study. Positioned within EU frameworks such as the Open Method of Coordination, the National Strategy for Roma Integration has yielded limited progress while poverty and segregation persist. The article traces two hierarchical

axes: supranational–national, where the EU pressures states but lacks deep contextual leverage; and national–civil society, where the Hungarian government restricts critical NGOs (e.g., the 2017 foreign-funded NGOs law; biased grantmaking), pushing them to seek influence in Brussels. Roma participation often becomes tokenistic, and civil society itself is hierarchical, with Roma-led groups marginalised. Applying Nancy Fraser's framework, Khemakhem argues that policies stress economic redistribution while neglecting cultural recognition and political representation, reinforcing injustices. Genuine inclusion requires stronger accountability and real Roma leadership.

Finally, the article by Dwi Wahyu Handayani, Amalinda Savirani and Maharani Hapsari, Discourse hierarchy on Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) for persons with disabilities. A case study on the GESI WASH Program in healthcare facilities in Bandar Lampung city, Indonesia critically investigates the hierarchical structuring of discourses surrounding inclusive development, particularly as they relate to persons with disabilities within the WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) sector. The study foregrounds the concept of discourse hierarchy to unpack how power relations shape the categorisation, representation, and treatment of disability within development interventions. Employing Michel Foucault's framework of discourse analysis, the study interrogates the regulatory and disciplinary mechanisms through which certain truths about inclusivity are constructed, legitimised, and maintained. Central to this process is the hierarchical positioning of people with disabilities as passive recipients of inclusion rather than as autonomous agents within the development paradigm. Focusing on the city of Bandar Lampung, the study uncovers how the GESI WASH program, while ostensibly aimed at promoting inclusion, reproduces subtle forms of exclusion. The findings reveal that such discourse hierarchies are not merely rhetorical but materially consequential. By privileging technocratic narratives and development logics that frame disability as a problem to be solved, the program inadvertently marginalises those it seeks to empower. In conclusion, Dwi et al. argue that inclusive development must move beyond symbolic incorporation and critically engage with the hierarchies embedded in discourse.

The special issue concludes with a book review written by Kinga Soós, who examines Amitav Ghosh's Smoke and Ashes through the lens of hierarchy and power. In her piece titled Narcoarchy: Opium as the source of hegemony, she highlights how Ghosh traces the opium trade as a mechanism through which global hierarchies were constructed and maintained, enabling Western empires and later American elites to convert control over narcotics into economic, political, and moral dominance. Soós emphasises that opium reinforced unequal structures between empire and colony, rulers and coerced labourers, while simultaneously eroding the sovereignty and social order of Qing China. The review shows how narratives of free trade and civilizational superiority concealed these asymmetries. By framing opium as central to both historical and contemporary power relations, Soós underscores the enduring logic of 'narcoarchy' as a foundation of global hierarchy.

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DWI WAHYU HANDAYANI[*] & MAHARANI HAPSARI[**]

Discourse hierarchy on Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) for persons with disabilities:

A case study on the GESI WASH Program in healthcare facilities in Bandar Lampung city, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examines power dynamics within the discourse hierarchy of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) in the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sector, focusing on how persons with disabilities are transformed from a vulnerable group into subjects of GESI in the WASH sector. The research object is the GESI WASH program in healthcare facilities (HCF) in Lampung Province, Indonesia. This study contributes to understanding the actual power relations that operate and perpetuate the maintenance of the truth in inclusive development. Previous research on GESI has primarily used a rational-instrumental approach that relies on WASH practice indicators. The researchers consider it essential to uncover the complexity of regulatory and disciplinary processes to transform exclusivity into inclusivity, utilising Michel Foucault's discourse analysis method. The data type is qualitative and was obtained through primary and secondary sources, including documents, in-depth interviews, and observations. The research findings reveal power relations within the GESI WASH program in HCF that categorise persons with disabilities into vulnerable groups, which are assigned and accepted as objects for change toward inclusive development. The knowledge gap in advocating for inclusive development truth categorises vulnerable groups as passive subjects. This contrasts with the expectation of individuals with disabilities as autonomous subjects, leading to feelings of marginalisation and anxiety amid the euphoria of inclusive development and reinforcing discourse hierarchies.

Keywords: *Power relations, Discourse hierarchy, Gender equality, Inclusive development, Persons with disabilities, WASH sector*

1 Introduction

The global development agenda for 2030 aims to create a better and more sustainable world. Within this timeframe of less than a decade, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) has become a truth that reinforces human rights in access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services. GESI has evolved into a knowledge system, with robust processes organising poor WASH service conditions in various countries into access to services that are adequate and safe for all. As a result, various international conferences have brought together experts from gender and WASH organisations to discuss the GESI knowledge system, which emphasises inclusivity as

a fundamental principle. The statement regarding the need for water and sanitation services as a basic right, including everyone (regardless of their stage of development and socioeconomic conditions), is from the declaration of the United Nations Water Conference in Mar del Plata (Argentina) in 1977 (United Nations [UN], 1977, pp. 66-67). The 2010 United Nations General Assembly resolution states that countries must strive to achieve universal access to water and sanitation for all, without discrimination (ohchr.org, 2025). At the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Gender Equality, Water Availability, Sanitation, and Hygiene (2017), an important statement was made that 'taps and toilets alone are not enough' (Miletto & L. Thuy, 2019). This statement emphasises that the WASH sector requires a comprehensive approach that addresses both access and benefits, taking into account social, cultural, and human rights factors. Meanwhile, according to WaterAid, WASH systems require the presence of all actors, working together to influence the achievement of WASH access (Tam et al., 2022, p. 5).

The principle of inclusivity has been agreed upon since 1995 at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen. Inclusive development refers to the global agreement in 2015, in the form of the document 'Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', which contains the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016, as cited in Widianingsih & Paskarina, 2019, pp. 137–138). The formation of an inclusive society is a society for all that actively participates in decision-making (Popova, 2020, p. 117) — additionally, enhancing capacity to enable marginalised groups to access opportunities, recognising a pluralistic rights system, and redistributing resources (Pouw & Gupta, 2017, p. 105). According to Gupta and Vegelin (2016), the scope of inclusive development acknowledges the strong relationship between goals and their integration into the global community. This requires conceptual coherence between the SDGs themselves and their implementation. Therefore, implementation methods must incorporate the principles of inclusive development to address unequal power relations, ensuring that these goals can be truly achieved.

The GESI WASH knowledge system classifies countries, regions, and populations based on their access to safe and poor WASH services. According to the 2022 WHO and UNICEF report, as well as the study by Shiva and Saha (2025), populations with low access to the WASH sector are primarily found in low-income and lower-middle-income countries. Furthermore, population segregation in fragile contexts affects approximately one in ten people worldwide. Fragile countries, in the context of the SDGs, are those facing difficulties achieving the SDGs due to their vulnerability to unstable economic, social, and political conditions. The SDGs aim to improve the foundation for developing countries and the world's poorest populations (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016, pp. 444–445).

The 2025 SDGs Report indicates that WASH conditions are not aligned with the 2030 agenda. By 2024, 2.2 billion people will still lack access to safely managed drinking water, 3.4 billion people will lack access to safely managed sanitation, and 1.7 billion people will lack basic hygiene services at home (UN, 2025, p. 20). In terms of GESI, these data represent disparities that need to be addressed to meet the 2030 commitments. According to the report, countries with low-income levels contribute to increasing inequalities, including in access to WASH services, with higher prevalence among urban populations, women, persons with disabilities, the poorest communities, and those with low levels of education (UN, 2025, p. 28). GESI WASH Truth also highlights the low level of community participation in development planning, partic-

ularly among marginalised groups such as women, youth, persons with disabilities, and slum dwellers.

Furthermore, GESI has developed a gender-sensitive governance framework. The GESI Truth not only identifies countries based on their access to WASH services but also identifies vulnerable groups within communities. Research by Macura and colleagues (2023) reveals that women, girls, sexual and gender minorities, persons with disabilities, communities marginalised due to ethnicity, caste, poverty, or other factors, and those living in vulnerable situations, such as refugees or homeless individuals, are considered to be disproportionately affected. Research by Walker & Walker (1997) states that this vulnerability takes the form of restrictions or denials of social, political, economic, and cultural rights that contribute to an individual's social integration into society.

The researchers have identified essential points for reflection and academic analysis in the implementation of GESI in the WASH sector. Research by Burt and colleagues (2016) indicates that WASH interventions are linked to demands for dignity, rather than merely to the meeting of women's safety and hygiene needs. When referring to hygiene and identifying who is 'unclean', WASH statements unconsciously create or reinforce social marginalisation, perpetuating existing forms of oppression or freeing those who are oppressed. This research can serve as inspiration, demonstrating that the truth about a program's goodness is not complete. Therefore, the researchers are interested in examining vulnerable groups and how GESI changes them to become disciplined and self-disciplined individuals in the WASH sector. The researchers examine this as a process of power that operates in discourse to shape the desired subject — subjects who are disciplined and self-disciplined by changing their behaviour to align with GESI in the WASH sector.

One of the developing countries in the context of GESI WASH is Indonesia, a country in Southeast Asia with significant infrastructure disparities and limited access to WASH services for vulnerable groups. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency of the Republic of Indonesia (*Badan Pusat Statistik*-BPS, 2025), the poverty rate in Indonesia in March 2025 was 8.47 per cent (23.85 million people) of the total population of 286,693,693. The country is committed to the SDGs set in 2015, with the target of achieving social, economic, and environmental policies worldwide by 2030 (UN, 2015; IPCC 2014; Revi et al., 2014, as cited in Pratama & Simatupang, 2024, p. 6). Indonesia's commitment to supporting the SDGs is documented in Presidential Regulation No. 59 of 2017 on the Implementation of SDGs. This regulation aims to ensure the achievement of Indonesia's SDGs through the development of national policy frameworks such as the Roadmap to 2030, the National Action Plan, and the Local Government Action Plan (National Action Plan and Local Action Plan for SDGs). Therefore, WASH sector development requires transformative GESI to improve and transform WASH development processes from exclusive to more inclusive (Prasetyo et al., February 2019, p. 1). One of the programs targets sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), including addressing WASH issues. However, the challenges in implementing WASH are the provision of adequate infrastructure, sustainable water resource management, and changes in community behaviour related to sanitation and hygiene.

The principle of inclusive development based on human rights in the WASH sector has become a global agreement and an interesting topic for study. The researchers were interested in selecting a case study of individuals with disabilities participating in

a GESI WASH program at a primary health care facility, known as a puskesmas/*pusat kesehatan masyarakat* (Community Health Centre) in Bandar Lampung City, Lampung Province, Indonesia. The GESI WASH program in HCF is interesting because it is the first pilot project in Indonesia. The program involves all vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, in a working group that evaluates and provides recommendations on the performance of WASH services in puskesmas and acts as natural leaders on clean and healthy living behaviours in the community. Previous programs, such as WASH in HCF, did not incorporate a GESI approach, and most WASH sector implementation and research used a health sector approach.

The participation of persons with disabilities in various development sectors in Indonesia has been promoted through efforts to achieve equal rights to a healthy, productive, independent, and dignified life. The Indonesian government ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities through Law No. 8 of 2016 on Persons with Disabilities, which aligns with the development of quality, competitive, and inclusive human resources as outlined in the National Long-Term Development Plan (*Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Panjang Nasional*-RPJPN) 2025–2045. This law emphasises the government's obligation to provide access to adequate health services, education, employment, and public facilities. Additionally, policies such as Government Regulation (*Peraturan Pemerintah*/PP.) No. 70 of 2019 and Ministerial Regulation of National Development Planning (*Peraturan Menteri Perencanaan Pembangunan Nasional*/*PPN*) No. 3 of 2021 provide operational frameworks for respecting, protecting, and empowering persons with disabilities (Ikawati, 2024).

Furthermore, achieving access to water, sanitation, and hygiene has become a sustainable mandate in Indonesia's development plans. The Indonesian government aims to achieve the following targets in the WASH sector by 2030: 45 per cent safe drinking water management and 100 per cent safe drinking water services in educational and healthcare facilities across Indonesia. The targets for adequate sanitation services are 100 per cent safe sanitation, 30 per cent safe sanitation, and zero open defecation (OD), as well as 100 per cent of villages and neighbourhoods achieving open defecation-free status (Ministry of National Development Planning of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023, p. 24; Ministry of National Development Planning of the Republic of Indonesia/*Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Nasional*-Bappenas, 2024).

The GESI discourse advocates for equality in rights, responsibilities, and opportunities between men and women (Sukesi et al., 2021, p. 20), and the intersection of gender dimensions with marginal dimensions (Wolff, 2015, pp. 21–41) as exclusionary groups such as persons with disabilities, refugees, ethnic minorities, and children and families at risk (World Vision, 2023, p. 3), by accommodating their interests so that they receive protection from the state and stakeholders in society (Abdulkadir-Sunito et al., 2019, p. 22). Social inclusion is about placing the dignity and independence of individuals at the centre to achieve an ideal quality of life (Kertati, 2019, pp. 57–64), expanding access for marginalised individuals and groups, ensuring participation, and ensuring equitable benefits (Abdulkadir-Sunito et al., 2019, pp. 22–23).

In this study, the reality of inclusive development in the GESI WASH discourse can significantly impact the lives of persons with disabilities who strive to align themselves with the objectives of WASH sector development. However, on the other hand, they are faced with the reality that persons with disabilities are passive subjects of discipline as a vulnerable group. Vulnerable groups face a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion compared to the general population, experiencing stigmatisation, dis-

crimination, and marginalisation by society, both formally through laws, policies, and programs, and informally through social and cultural practices (Sugarda et al., 2021, p. 21). According to Ikawati and colleagues (2024), in Potret Penyandang Disabilitas di Indonesia (Portrait of Persons with Disabilities in Indonesia), disability is a complex and dynamic process that results from the interaction between individuals with functional limitations and an unaccommodating environment, thereby preventing them from fully participating in society. Furthermore, the researcher poses the research question: how does the GESI discourse hierarchy create passive subjects among vulnerable groups in GESI WASH programs, and what are the effects of this discourse, particularly on people with disabilities? The objective of this study is to elaborate on the power relations in the process of transforming people with disabilities into passive subjects of GESI in the WASH sector. The findings of this study are beneficial for fostering wise attitudes in the implementation of inclusive development.

2 Literature review

Previous research on GESI has primarily been conducted using a rational-instrumental approach, considering indicators and linking them to legal-rational factors, namely the effectiveness of achieving policy objectives. The dominance of the legal-rational approach stems from instrumental rational rules, the pursuit of desired goals (Max Weber, as cited in Gane, 2002, pp. 15–26). It leads to efficiency, coordination, and control over the physical and social environment (Elwell, 1999, as cited in Özer, 2010, p. 15), increased division of labour, and leads to increased production, distribution of goods and services (Gerth Mills, 1994, p. 6, as cited in Özer, 2010, p. 15). Weber's general theory of rationalisation, as body rationalisation, is an essential element in achieving goals (Gerth & Mills, 1994; Özer, 2010, pp. 14–15).

The researchers consider it important not to focus solely on the instrumental aspects of a policy or program. The political process cannot be reduced to a set of fixed state institutions and actors who maximise rational utility (Kulawik, 2009, p. 266). Therefore, the researchers are interested in analysing political discourse using Michel Foucault's approach. Michel Foucault's perspective can serve as an entry point for an alternative approach to understanding policies and programs in terms of instrumental rationality. Özer (2010, p. 14) emphasises Foucault's concept of the rationalisation of the body, which places greater emphasis on the relationship between knowledge and power in human beings, linking human science, discourse, and institutions.

Actions based (Foucault, 1977, as cited in Özer, 2010, p. 19). exclusively on instrumental rationality have minimal capabilities in complex environments. Discursive democracy can make a greater contribution to solving complex social problems (Dryzek, 1990, p. 57). In this regard, Foucault explains the rejection of the metahistorical dissemination of ideal meanings and teleology (the doctrine that everything and every event has a specific purpose) as being unlimited (Foucault, 1977, p. 140, as cited in Gane, 2002, p. 86). Power relations are directly linked to the body, which it invests, marks, trains, tortures, forces to perform tasks, and uses to emit signs (In political theory and systems of thought (discourse), it is a prison that disciplines its followers and serves only as a trap and means of oppression through various forms of subtlety (Foucault, 1980).

Furthermore, previous research on WASH has limitations, with few studies on WASH implementation or behaviour change interventions recorded in Indonesia, in-

dicating a gap between science and policy (Satriani et al., 2022, p. 1). Therefore, this article presents the results of a study examining the mechanisms of power dynamics within GESI in the WASH sector that influence WASH behaviour at the individual level among vulnerable groups with limited access to WASH and at risk of adverse WASH impacts. Furthermore, the researcher elaborates on experiences from GESI WASH practices at the individual level, with a focus on persons with disabilities. These power relations, often unrecognised, reveal a hierarchy of discourse that poses a challenge to the goals of inclusive development.

3 Theoretical framework

This theoretical framework outlines the existence of a GESI WASH discourse hierarchy in the process of regulating, disciplining, and ultimately changing the practices of individuals and communities with disabilities related to access to safe WASH. In the process of shaping the desired GESI WASH subjects, the researchers use the biopower model, a term used to describe the structures, relationships, and practices through which political subjects are formed and utilised, alongside the power that has shaped modernity. This is the mechanism that transforms knowledge-power into an agent of human life transformation. The emergence of this disciplinary form of power in the form of knowledge serves as a legitimising discourse for the GESI WASH regime of truth. Discourse creates tools for shaping knowledge and expertise that support the discourse (Cisney et al., 2020, p. 4).

In the early 1980s, Foucault identified three distinct ways in which humans become subjects. First, discursive practices that claim 'scientific status' for themselves and seek to define/shape human subjects as individuals who speak, work, and live. Second, an agenda of coercive, institutionalised, and largely invisible control practices that catalogue, differentiate, and engineer humans into modern subjects. They acquire identities as the insane and the sane, the sick and the healthy, criminals and good people. Discursive practices, as well as control practices, operate at various levels, involving humans in various modern knowledge-power projects or truth games (Krylova, 2024, p. 721).

Third, the process of subjectification as a practice of the self is a concern for the self as freedom to understand oneself, extending to social practice. This practice of the self is the way subjects actively shape themselves within society, amid complex regimes of knowledge and power that are not of their creation. Humans practice tools of self-formation — rules, regulations, and deep-seated doctrines — unconsciously, unspoken, and provided by society, which are largely pre-reflective and akin to quasi-subjects with full power within the self, enabling one to know oneself, improve oneself, transcend oneself, and master the desires that control the self. They have no choice but to learn, internalise, and apply (Krylova, 2024, p. 722).

Foucault claims that the body of knowledge production and discipline has the task of calculating, interpreting, and predicting the meaning of social data as considerations for regulating individuals and populations, as well as their bodies (Cisney et al, 2020, p. 5). Discipline is a set of strategies, procedures, and behavioural norms associated with a specific institutional context that subsequently permeates general ways of thinking and behaving. Discipline permeates various arenas and institutions that have regulatory mechanisms, such as prison regulation, as Michel Foucault highlighted in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1977). Disciplinary regimes permeate work-

places, the military, schools, universities, and so on. Foucault's disciplinary structure does not explain the process by which these practices are disseminated into other contexts through the role of agency. However, in his description of the disciplinary regime, the individual subject is seen as submissive to a particular discourse, in which resistance to its practices and procedures is futile, as they are so deeply ingrained in the individual (Mills, 2003, p. 44).

One of the disciplinary structures in Foucault's work is the panopticon, discussed in Discipline and Punish (1977), an architectural device designed to regulate people in such a way that they comply as if they were constantly being surveyed and watched (Mills, 2003, p. 45). Barry Smart argues that power, through hierarchical surveillance, is not ownership or property, but instead has the character of a specific apparatus, indicating that power is produced. Individuals are distributed within a permanent and continuous field (Smart 1985, p. 86, as cited in Mills 2003, p. 46). Individuals in the panopticon are compelled to internalise disciplinary views, thereby submitting to the field of visibility and assuming responsibility for power, inscribing within themselves power relations that simultaneously play both roles (Foucault 1991a, p. 202–203, as cited in Mills, 2003, p. 46).

What requires attention is the panopticon as a specific disciplinary control device in the form of sorting, categorisation, or segregation that serves to legitimise certain truths. The GESI discourse produces indicators that refer to categorisation as institutions that implement GESI comprehensively or with bias, or inclusively or exclusively. Institutions with GESI bias and groups considered vulnerable due to these conditions become the targets of programs aimed at disciplining, regulating, and changing them to comply with GESI principles and mechanisms. The dynamics of social hierarchy are one of the foundations of identity negotiations that reproduce individual subordination, as individuals seek to be accepted and valued (Kavoura et al., 2015, p. 9).

GESI-biased institutions and vulnerable groups are subordinated in GESI discourse, perceived as lacking knowledge, powerless, and lacking access, and thus in need of empowerment, guidance, assistance, and other special treatment. Productive power emerges when institutions and vulnerable groups strive to escape the categories of GESI bias and vulnerability. Thus, this categorisation serves as an effective surveillance mechanism within GESI discourse. However, it becomes an objectification of a set of GESI knowledge truths, which narrows the space for becoming a subject of GESI agency. Foucault views gender construction as an active, ongoing process of formation or enculturation. The tendency to view certain parties or groups as vulnerable and powerless within social structures hinders many types of analysis, obscuring the complexity of certain groups' experiences by placing too much emphasis on the universal nature of oppression (Showstack Sassoon 1987, p. 19, as cited in Mills, 2003, p. 64).

This model of disciplinary power is a critique of the juridical model of power. This research does not examine the implementation of development programs using the juridical model, which posits that power flows from a central source of state power that the people must exercise, nor does it study program implementation based on dialectical materialism. Instead, program implementation is the result of a process of power formation and discipline that operates within discourse. Foucault states that power is not conditioned by rulers but by discourse, and power is not repressive but productive, meaning it produces subjects who are subject to their subjectivity (Kelly, 1994, p. 374, as cited in Christensen, 2024, pp. 186–187). Foucault developed the

discipline model because he found that law was insufficient to understand the various power relationships at the micro level of society, which is a discursive and productive reality whose primary product is the human subject (Foucault, 1980, p. 98, as cited in Christensen, 2024, p. 187).

Power is closely related to knowledge. Power and knowledge are still considered two separate domains, but there is no field of knowledge without a field of power involved simultaneously (Foucault, 1980, as cited in Christensen, 2024, p. 187). Power that is exercised is given permanent, comprehensive, and ubiquitous instruments of surveillance (Foucault, 1991, p. 200; Christensen, 2024, p. 187). Power produces reality, the realm of objects and rituals of truth. The focus on regulating the body and shaping individuality, as described in subjectivation, highlights the adverse effects of power. It excludes, suppresses, censors, abstracts, masks, and hides (Foucault, 1991, p. 183, as cited in Christensen, 2024, p. 187). This form of power is applied in everyday life, directly categorising individuals, marking them with their individuality, binding them to their own identity, and imposing laws of truth that they must acknowledge, as well as others must acknowledge in them. This is a form of power that makes the individual a subject, a way of thinking different from subjugation (Foucault 1994b, p. 212, as cited in Christensen, 2024, p. 188), which states that power relations are only possible to the extent that the subject is free (Christensen, 2024, p. 189).

4 Methodology

This article is the result of research using Michel Foucault's discourse analysis to examine the relationship among power, knowledge, and truth in the context of the GESI WASH program in HCF. The researchers examines discursive practices to uncover the discourse process as a system of knowledge and practices that shape the understanding of reality considered proper or acceptable, both in terms of language and social and institutional practices. The linguistic aspect includes statements that reveal the context of the text and its effects. The social and institutional practice aspect is a procedural system that shapes the way of thinking about specific subjects, encapsulated in the regulations of the GESI WASH disciplinary process at the health centre. From this power-knowledge perspective, Foucault problematizes policies/programs as ideas and concepts aimed at increasing human control over the natural and social environment (Bacchi, 2010a, p. 2).

This discourse analysis research serves as an alternative to mainstream methods, namely conventional policy evaluation, which tends to focus on outcomes (Bacchi, 2010a). The stages of the research, as referenced by Bacchi (2010a, p. 3–13), is to determine the problematization, i.e., how the GESI WASH program in HCF is represented and conceptualised, in order to identify the representation of the program's problems. Second, examine the assumptions underlying the representation of problems in the statements of various program documents and interview results, to open up the possibility of discovering different, competing understandings and practices, and the existence of binary oppositions (i.e., concepts that place two ideas, each of which is understood in opposition to the other, e.g., strong men and vulnerable women). Women are not only opposed to men but also face other contexts such as economic status, ethnicity, religion, and so on, which affect their access to WASH services. In this context, discourse analysis rejects generalisations about the conditions of women and marginalised groups. Third, identify issues that can be raised but are silenced by

this representation of the problem. Fourth, reflecting on the implications or effects that flow from the representation of the problem, including discursive effects that are identified as silencing substantive criticism of the discourse.

Data collection was conducted through the examination of documents, research journals, in-depth interviews, and observations. Specific GESI WASH in HCF program documents related to persons with disabilities were obtained from the government, namely documents from the Bandar Lampung City Health Office, documents from five pilot project community health centres, activity reports from the National Development Planning Agency of the Republic of Indonesia (*Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Nasional Republik Indonesia/Bappenas RI*), and documents from the Central Statistics Agency of the Republic of Indonesia (*Badan Pusat Statistik Republik Indonesia/BPS RI*). Non-government documents on the GESI WASH in HCF program were obtained from the Dutch development organisation Stichting Nederlandse Vrijwilligers (SNV) Indonesia and Yayasan Konservasi Way Seputih-YKWS (Way Seputih Conservation Foundation). Additionally, research journals containing data related to disability access in the WASH sector were reviewed.

In-depth interviews were conducted based on interview guidelines with the following informants:

Leaders at the Health Office of Bandar Lampung City, Lampung Province, Indonesia

Leaders and staff of community health centres (puskesmas) as pilot projects for the GESI WASH program in HCF Bandar Lampung City, Lampung Province, Indonesia.

Activists from the Dutch development organisation Stichting Nederlandse Vrijwilligers (SNV) Indonesia and local non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Lampung Province: YKWS (Yayasan Konservasi Way Seputih).

The members of the WASH service working group at the puskesmas specifically for persons with disabilities consisted of five people. They were the chairperson and members of disability organisations, the Indonesian Women with Disabilities Association (*Himpunan Wanita Disabilitas Indonesia*-HWDI) of Lampung Province and the Indonesian Association of Persons with Disabilities (*Persatuan Penyandang Disabilitas Indonesia*- PPDI) of Lampung Province.

At the beginning of the interview, an oral agreement was reached between the researcher and the informants, stipulating that their full names would not be included in the published article. The observation involved the researcher visiting facilities for people with disabilities at five pilot project health centres. The researcher observed the availability of toilets for people with disabilities and other facilities that make it easy and comfortable for them to access healthcare at the health centres. The research location was in Lampung Province (Indonesia) because most WASH research is conducted in provinces on Java Island, which has the best research facilities in Indonesia, followed by Central Indonesia and Eastern Indonesia. Therefore, there is still limited research on Sumatra Island, particularly Lampung Province (Satriani et al., 2022, p. 7). Furthermore, Bandar Lampung City, spanning an area of 197.22 km², serves as the economic hub and provincial capital, with a population density of 6,453 people per km². This coastal city faces issues of slum settlements covering an area of 4,365.23 hectares (Putri, 2021) and a poverty rate of 7.77 per cent (Badan Pusat Statistik [BPS], 2024, p. 16).

Data collection techniques: the researcher refers to Kendall and G. Wickham (1999, p. 26), who outline the steps of Foucault's discourse analysis research. First, collect

statements obtained from interviews, documents, writings, and media reports. Second, map the dynamic relationships between statements and how the statement system operates. Third, formulate rules for the repetition of statements, focusing on the procedures of government authorities, institutions, and disability groups to disseminate disciplinary statements so that they become part of the truth. Fourth, analyse the subject's position regarding the statements, which illustrate how to become an actor.

5 Problematization and the desired role of persons with disabilities

The WASH in HCF (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene/WASH in Health Care Facilities/HCF) program is one of the Indonesian government's commitments to the 2020 World Health Assembly (WHA) declaration, to increase investment in policies, infrastructure, and capacity related to the availability of WASH services in health facilities. These WASH services refer to WASH Fit (Water and Sanitation for Health Facility Improvement Tool) developed by UNICEF and WHO, which focuses on improving access to WASH services in terms of water availability, sanitation, hand hygiene, waste management, environmental cleaning and disinfection, energy and electricity, management, and consideration of gender and disability interests. The WASH in HCF program was being intensified from 2020 to 2023, as the world faced the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lack of access to WASH services has hampered efforts to control the virus. Indonesia is implementing the WASH in HCF program in various community health centres (puskesmas). For example, a pilot program was implemented in five provinces from October 2020 to early 2021: Papua, Nusa Tenggara Timur, Nusa Tenggara Barat, Sulawesi Selatan, and Aceh. The program was then expanded to 300 puskesmas across Indonesia (Bappenas and UNICEF, 2022, p. 21).

An interesting aspect for the researchers is the WASH program in HCF using the GESI (Gender Equality and Social Inclusion) approach, namely the GESI WASH in HCF Indonesia program, which was first implemented in two cities in Lampung Province (Bandar Lampung City and Metro City) as a pilot project. What makes this program unique is that it establishes water, sanitation, and environmental hygiene working groups at health centres, involving representatives from health centres, government staff, journalists, community leaders, youth organisations, child-focused communities, women's activists, and disability groups, all of whom represent various vulnerable groups.

A baseline survey conducted by SNV Indonesia in 2018 found that found that out of 32 community health centers (puskesmas), 45 per cent did not have hand washing facilities, 16 per cent did not have toilets, and 84 per cent had toilets that were not adequate, meaning they did not meet basic standards, such as limited number of toilets, no separation between men and women, and no toilets for people with disabilities (Yayasan Konservasi Way Seputih [YKWS], 2021). Given this situation, SNV Indonesia considers that the development of WASH services in health facilities has not comprehensively applied a GESI perspective, which takes into account social, cultural, and gender differences as well as individual inequalities. According to SNV Indonesia, improving poor WASH conditions in health centres requires interventions to enhance the capacity of vulnerable groups to voice their aspirations, network, and participate in policy-making and decision-making related to WASH services in the region (Bappenas and UNICEF, 2022, pp. 49–50).

GESI WASH in HCF in Bandar Lampung City, sponsored by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in collaboration with SNV Indonesia and the international NGO Simavi (*Steun in Medische Aangelegenheden Voor Inheemsen*/Medical Aid for Indigenous Affairs), and supported by the local NGO Yayasan Konservasi Way Seputih (YKWS). The program, implemented from June 2021 to September 2022, is part of the WASH SDGs program, also known as the urban sanitation program, as Indonesia's commitment to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) global agenda. The program selected five community health centres in Bandar Lampung City as pilot projects for other community health centres to achieve good WASH services.

SNV Indonesia and YKWS interpret gender and disability indicators as essential elements of inclusive development. Inclusive development is crucial for ensuring community participation in the WASH sector, encompassing planning, implementation, and evaluation, as it fosters recognition and respect for diversity.

GESI is always a cross-cutting issue that we will always strive for. We integrate it into all our programs in any sector, ... including WASH (SNV Indonesia activist APP, interviewed on 6 February 2024).

Those who know their needs best in the WASH sector (YKWS activist FE, interviewed on 23 January 2024).

The government stated that the GESI WASH in HCF program is their first experience as an inclusive program in the health sector.

Previously, health programs were handled by the health department. So, no one left behind means we do not leave anything out in our services to the community. This is something we learned for the first time from our friends at SNV (Health department staff member AJ, city government, WASH SDG program workshop, 21 February 2024).

At the beginning of the program implementation, the concept of inclusive development introduced by SNV Indonesia and YKWS surprised the city government and health centres, particularly regarding the capacity of people with disabilities when involved as part of the working group (Health department staff member AJ, city government, interviewed on 13 March 2024). SNV Indonesia conducted a baseline survey in 2018, mapping out the vulnerable groups, their conditions, and the disparities among these groups at the city, provincial, and national levels in terms of welfare and other social inclusion factors.

We identified vulnerable groups, including women, the elderly, renters, children, people with disabilities, and the extremely poor. This became the basis for developing strategies to engage all these beneficiaries (SNV Indonesia activist APP, interviewed on 6 February 2024).

The results of the 2020 Long Form Population Census (BPS RI, 2023) revealed that the prevalence of persons with disabilities in Indonesia reached 1.43 per cent, or approximately one to two people out of every hundred residents. This data was collected following the international standards of the Washington Group and serves as an important basis for evaluating national policies, such as the National Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities (2021–2024), as well as monitoring global SDG targets (Ikawati, 2024).

People with disabilities can access the best WASH services and receive support from health centres to enhance their capacity for active participation in monitoring and providing feedback, thereby improving the quality of health centre services. Additionally, they serve as natural leaders within their groups, raising awareness among the sur-

rounding community about the importance of Clean and Healthy Living Behaviors-CHLB (*Perilaku Hidup Bersih dan Sehat-PHBS*) and supporting the Open Defecation Free (ODF) target in Bandarlampung City (Yayasan Konservasi Way Seputih [YKWS], 2022, pp. 22, 30, 33).

6 Compliance with inclusive development

The term 'inclusive' brings a breath of fresh air for vulnerable groups to have equal access to development. Disability activists recognise themselves as part of vulnerable groups, a result of the problematization of various programs, including GESI WASH. Thus, the discipline of being a vulnerable group has long been operating behind various development programs. They also believe that inclusive development provides opportunities for vulnerable groups to become more empowered. Edy, a disabled activist for disability rights (interviewed on 5 March 2024), stated that inclusive development serves as a reminder not to be discriminated against when accessing public services and always to be included.

Furthermore, disability activists welcomed the GESI WASH program in HCF. They can convey their aspirations to the health centre so that the services and infrastructure are disability-friendly. Disability rights activist Edy (interviewed on 5 March 2024) stated that health centres must reorganise their spaces so that pregnant women with disabilities can more easily access service areas. Health centres need to provide sit-down toilets with ample space to accommodate wheelchair users (Siti, an activist from the Women with Disabilities Organisation, interviewed on 29 February 2024).

People with disabilities conducted observations to assess the quality of WASH services at health centres. During this process, Siti and other disability activists visited one of the health centres that was a pilot project to check on patient-friendly services, the availability of toilets for people with disabilities, facilities that cater to people with physical disabilities, the presence of a gentle slope for wheelchair access, handrails, and so on, in order to increase the number of patient visits. Disability rights activist Any (interviewed on 4 March 2024) stated that the government should consult with people with disabilities when designing infrastructure. The lack of alignment with inclusive design standards and the exclusion of people with disabilities in the planning process led Any to conclude that the health centre's services are exclusive, highlighting areas for improvement.

The government must consult with people with disabilities when constructing buildings. They should not make the ramps at building entrances too steep for people with disabilities; ramps that are too steep are unsafe and can cause accidents. They always emphasise the importance of inclusivity, which means involving everyone. So, what are our needs from the government? I believe that the health centre services are not yet inclusive (Female disability rights activist Any, interviewed on 4 March 2024).

I have been studying inclusivity for a long time. The benchmark should be non-disabled people. This is what needs to be promoted more—whether they can understand and implement it (Disability rights activist Edy, interviewed on 5 March 2024).

These statements show varied responses over time, with persons with disabilities continuously categorised and accepted as a vulnerable group, even before the implementation of the WASH program. In health centre services, persons with disabilities are categorised as a vulnerable group because they are identified as having physical

limitations, making them one of the priority service recipients. Persons with disabilities can sit in chairs labelled as priority, which are not intended for other general patients. Additionally, they receive special queues to avoid long waits. In WASH services at health centres, WASH infrastructure also accommodates the needs of people with disabilities, such as toilets with ample space.

Yes, that is what we have to accept until now; we have to label ourselves as disabled... that is our condition as disabled people. However, it is important to distinguish between the general public and people with disabilities. The term 'disability' is used to describe a group or an individual who is different from the general public. However, the government should not limit us (Edy, a disability rights activist, interviewed on 5 March 2024).

Siti, a female disability rights activist (interviewed on 29 February 2024), stated that she is willing to participate in programs addressing issues related to women and disabilities. According to her, people with disabilities should regularly participate in various programs to receive assistance and develop skills. Demands for inclusive development are growing stronger, with discourse or knowledge about the need for assistance when people with disabilities face severe and layered vulnerabilities. Stereotypes about disabilities being either milder or more severe, as well as layered identities such as women with disabilities, poverty, and living in slum areas, reflect the complexity of discourse in shaping vulnerable groups.

The truth of inclusive development provides opportunities for persons with disabilities to provide feedback and suggestions to health centres regarding inclusive WASH services. These vulnerable groups strengthen the 'concept' of inclusive development. The involvement of vulnerable groups is a crucial point in building a solid, inclusive development. The knowledge that people with disabilities receive assistance, gain improved skills, become priority patients, and have access to disability-friendly public infrastructure is considered special treatment that is reasonable given their physical limitations. Special treatment is considered to provide people with disabilities with equal access, which is the best thing for them. People with disabilities who receive good WASH services will improve their health quality and participate in development. Acceptance of inclusive subjects is the result of repeated socialisation about inclusive development, which persons with disabilities have internalised. The researchers analysed the power processes operating in this discourse, showing persons with disabilities as passive subjects of the classification of the WASH sector as a vulnerable group.

7 Providing accessible toilets in health facilities

In an interview with local NGO activist YKWS on September 20, 2024, it was revealed that prior to implementing the program, the NGO conducted an initial survey on the condition of WASH services at the health centre. The findings showed that the number of toilets was still limited, making it unsuitable for the number of visitors, who can reach 200 per day. Toilets were not separated between male and female toilets, and there was no distinction between toilets for people without disabilities and people with disabilities. This was considered one of the reasons for reluctance to seek treatment at health centres.

There is a health centre with only one toilet, so everyone has to use it. However, people using wheelchairs still find it difficult to use the toilet (YKWS Activist FE, interviewed on 20 September 2023).

The WASH in HCF service guidelines stipulate that health centres must have toilets that are accessible to persons with disabilities. Toilets must have waste disposal facilities or washing facilities with water available, and there must be hygiene and health behaviour campaigns using information media to promote the proper use of toilets. At the start of the program, most health centres faced land and budget constraints in providing toilets for people with disabilities. With additional funding from the NGO SNV Indonesia, health centres were able to build toilets for people with disabilities using various strategies, as a practical approach tailored to the conditions of each health centre. These toilets also serve the elderly, children, menstruating women, and postpartum women. These toilets have seating for users and toilet handrails, and are equipped to meet the needs of menstruating women. They are also equipped with showers, menstrual pads, special waste bins for menstrual pads (also known as 'lady bins'), and hand soap.

The health department continues to encourage health centres to provide toilets for people with disabilities, emphasising the importance of achieving accreditation standards. Health centre accreditation is used to measure the performance of health centre services, which must also implement inclusive practices. However, even when toilets are available and fully equipped, health centre staff have occasionally been forced to close the toilet access doors, citing reasons such as to prevent frequent dirtiness, ongoing repairs, or frustration with users who do not follow the health centre's guidelines for maintaining cleanliness and comfort for other users.

8 The role of persons with disabilities in the WASH sector

Persons with disabilities, as representatives of the community, are expected to promote clean and healthy living behaviours (*Perilaku Hidup Bersih dan Sehat-PHBS*) among the community around the health centre, or at least within their own groups, including campaigns to stop open defecation. People with disabilities are asked to participate in the development of standard operating procedures (SOPs) for the GESI WASH in HCF program, namely SOPs for the implementation of the duties and functions of officers responsible for improving WASH services at health centers, consisting of guidelines for observing the possible environmental impact of health center activities; maintenance and upkeep of WASH facilities; and SOPs for proposing budgets for improving WASH services at health centers. Additionally, they participate in observation activities to monitor the availability and quality of services, propose ideas for service quality improvements, and advocate for policy formulation and budget allocation.

YKWS and SNV Indonesia, together with the Bandar Lampung City Health Office, then agreed to add four WASH service indicators in HCF to suit local conditions, namely the perceptions of the surrounding community, the perceptions of WASH services among health centre users, the perceptions of the local government and health workers about the WASH program.

...There is a working group that brings together the health office, health centres, and community members, people with disabilities, women's groups, representatives of religious organisations, and so on. This working group conducts a social audit to determine why these health centres have inadequate facilities and why they do not provide toilets for people with disabilities. From this process, it was found that most health centres have limited budgets. Furthermore, there is a lack of understanding

among service providers, namely health workers at puskesmas, regarding the meaning of inclusive services; they are not yet fully aware (YKWS activist FE, interviewed on 20 September 2023).

Various experiences of people with disabilities who are part of the WASH service working group at the puskesmas. HWDI activist Tri (interviewed on 26 February 2024), who works as a tailor, was asked to join the working group of one of the puskesmas for the WASH component of the HCF program.

I agreed to join the health centre's working group because it is a positive activity that will expand my knowledge and experience, so I immediately said yes. After that, I attended meetings and received guidance.

As a member of the WASH in HCF working group, Tri contributes suggestions and ideas based on observations about the condition of WASH services in HCF for people with disabilities. Tri suggested that toilets be built to meet standards for people with disabilities, making them easily accessible, especially for those with physical disabilities who use wheelchairs, which require specially designed doors and toilet spaces.

Tri admitted that the WASH in HCF program was her first experience participating in such an activity. When she received a request from the community health centre and YKWS to provide safe sanitation education to the surrounding community, Tri felt overwhelmed and awkward. She felt unable to convey something important to others because she had not been involved in women's activities in her neighbourhood, such as the Family Empowerment and Welfare Organisation (PKK/*Pemberdayaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga*). Previously, during elementary and junior high school, she often faced bullying from peers due to her physical condition. She continued to prove her academic excellence, even participating in mathematics and science olympiads. However, Tri was unable to continue her education in high school due to her parents' financial constraints. Her parents believed that with a disability, it would be difficult to find a job, so she needed to acquire a skill. Following her parents' advice, Tri enrolled in a sewing course.

The story of another person with a disability is similar. They feel incapable, lack experience, and believe it is not their area of expertise.

I hope I can convey it, but it is not my area of expertise. Someone professional in the field should do it. I can only understand it (Female disability rights activist Siti, interviewed on 29 February 2024).

Even among fellow people with disabilities, I feel hesitant to speak about sanitation. I am afraid I will make a mistake; it is not my area of expertise (Edy, a disabled activist for disability rights, interviewed on 5 March 2024).

The experiences of people with disabilities, without realising it, have been shaped by the discipline imposed on them as part of a vulnerable group, a condition accepted from a young age. This includes being part of a group that struggles to access education and employment and receives minimal support and recognition from family and the surrounding community. Most people with disabilities aged 15 and above have only completed primary school education. Furthermore, around 40 per cent of them have never attended school or completed elementary school. Meanwhile, only 16.78 per cent have completed secondary education or higher education (Tusianti et al., 2023, p. 79). More than 75 per cent of children with disabilities have not received adequate access to education.

In terms of access to employment, people with disabilities face discrimination in the labour market, both in terms of access to jobs and opportunities for advancement.

Women with disabilities are more vulnerable and disadvantaged in the labour market compared to men (Ikawati, 2024, pp. 85, 95). This leads to subordination and conflict between vulnerable and empowered roles. People with disabilities often struggle to collaborate quickly on assignments that promote WASH principles, as they may not have been involved in community groups or activities.

The role conflict between vulnerability and empowerment among people with disabilities has existed since the onset of discriminatory treatment toward them. Population categorisation during the colonial era was based on physical conditions to control the colonised population for efficiency. Health scientists and missionaries before the 1900s treated the sick by promoting the idea of assistance for the poor and those with disabilities. Before the era of the scientific medical perspective, society viewed disability as related to mystical or supernatural beliefs, including supernatural powers, disturbances from entities like jinn, sins, and similar concepts (Salim, 2021, pp. 134–135).

Advances in health science, marked by the development of categorisation or specification of service types based on the type of disability, accompanied by a focus on the quality of life of persons with disabilities and their families, to enable them to become independent (Salim, 2021, pp. 136–137). The scientific medical perspective on disabled bodies has increasingly influenced government bureaucracy in Indonesia. In terms of education, children with disabilities are provided with free 'special schools' by the government to ensure they have a decent life. However, an educational model that separates students based on physical conditions reinforces the stigma that people with disabilities are different. Accessibility in Indonesia, including the construction of facilities for people with disabilities, such as special toilets, began with the enactment of the first Law on Persons with Disabilities in 1997. This law referenced human rights as a result of the struggle by disability organisations and international pressure (Salim, 2021, p. 160).

Law No. 8 of 2016 on Persons with Disabilities changed the term 'disabled' to 'persons with disabilities'. However, the previous terminology, which focused on physical deficiencies, has received significant criticism. Many parties have called for a more appropriate term, as the previous terminology harms specific communities. 'Disability' is perceived to imply inability due to physical or mental deficiencies. Many parties tend to interpret attention to disability as a form of assistance for those considered weaker. Meanwhile, disability refers to individuals who are unable to function due to discrimination and a lack of access and accommodation. This legal regulation on persons with disabilities does not focus on the value of physical disability, but rather on discriminatory views toward people with certain conditions.

Not only is there uncertainty about the hierarchy of empowered and vulnerable persons with disabilities, but intersectionality, due to the intersection of various identities within an individual with a disability, creates even more complex internal conflicts. A female disability activist living in a slum on the coast admitted to experiencing anxiety in WASH practices.

I am an activist; I often receive education about sanitation, and outside I help women, but here I still dispose of toilet waste into the sea (interview with female disability rights activist Zairiah, 5 March 2024).

Zairiah lacks the economic means to secure adequate housing, forcing her to live in an urban slum. Her home is built on a foundation supported by piles of plastic waste and sand, with manual land reclamation over the sea. Although the house has a toilet,

it lacks a septic tank, resulting in waste being discharged directly into the sea through a pipe. Residents not only dispose of human waste but also household trash directly into the sea. Zairiah expressed her anxiety, which makes her feel uncomfortable, and she constantly tries to collect plastic waste to compact and mix with sand, hoping to eventually use it to build a septic tank. The anxiety intensified, leading to more intensive socialisation and discipline regarding WASH. However, the effectiveness of safe WASH discipline is challenged by the knowledge that safe sanitation requires funding and adequate land. The inability to access safe WASH is related to limited funds due to low income. Siyaranamual (2020, as cited in Ikawati, 2024, p. 96) explains that workers with disabilities tend to be employed in low-level jobs, often characterised by informal work and low wages. Women with disabilities are more likely to work in informal activities than men. Furthermore, the low access to WASH experienced by people with disabilities poses challenges in terms of perceived loss of opportunities for education, career, and the ability to participate in meaningful and productive work (White et al., 2016; Wrisdale et al., 2017). Efforts to claim the role of persons with disabilities continue through awareness-raising, skills development, mentoring, and empowerment. However, this is accompanied by the internalisation of persons with disabilities as a vulnerable group over time and across various development programs. Ultimately, this becomes a paradox for persons with disabilities, as passive subjects experiencing anxiety.

9 Discussion: The hierarchy of discourse as the creation of passive subjects

In this discussion section, the researcher explores the relationship between power and knowledge to understand how discourse creates vulnerable groups as passive subjects. In this study, the process of implementing GESI WASH in HCF, from the government level to the individual level, reveals the intricate and interwoven nature of power. Power only exists when it is manifested in relational forms (Foucault 1982, 219, as cited in Haugaard, 2022, p. 346). Regarding subjects and power, Foucault begins his writing by acknowledging that economic history provides a good instrument for studying economic-political relations as a process of exploitation. Foucault uses the structural model provided by Marxism and Saussureanism as an analogy for power, with the consequence of overemphasising structure at the expense of agency. Power is theorised as something metaphysical in itself or a deep structural phenomenon that conditions social relations in a way analogous to the economy in structural Marxism. Furthermore, linguistics and semiotics offer instruments for studying relationships of meaning (Foucault Chomsky, 2011, as cited in Haugaard, 2022, p. 347).

He argues that the relationship of power processes is how humans are made into social subjects (Haugaard, 2022, p. 347). However, in Foucault's conceptualisation, the social subject is a passive entity shaped by power. In this case, he argues that the word 'subject' has two meanings: submission to others through control and dependence, and attachment to one's own identity through conscience or self-knowledge (Haugaard, 2022, p. 347).

The WASH discourse identifies vulnerable groups that are targeted by WASH sector development to achieve equal access. Vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, will receive some treatments to transform them into desired subjects. The desired subject, which is the demand for participation of persons with disabilities or

categorisation as a vulnerable group, is a regulation that generates anxiety. The anxiety that persons with disabilities must face is the transition from passive subjects to autonomous subjects, not merely from exclusive subjects to inclusive subjects.

For Foucault, the process of becoming a social subject is almost inherently a process of subjugation. Individuals are the result of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent that they are the result, they are elements of its articulation (Foucault 1980, 98, as cited in Haugaard, 2022, p. 347). The idea that power 'articulates' social subjects is highly structural, reminiscent of Althusser (1970), and deprives social subjects of the right to act meaningfully (Haugaard, 2022, p. 347).

In Davies' (Loveday, 2018, 2003, p. 93, as cited in) work on 'new managerialism' in Australian higher education, fear and anxiety are helpful from the system's perspective because they drive the continuous renewal of resolutions to make oneself compliant with guidelines and considered good enough within the new system. Anxiety is not an unintended consequence or malfunction, but rather an inherent feature of a system designed to enhance productivity and the potential accumulation of capital (Loveday, 2018, Hall Bowles, 2016, as cited in). Anxiety should be conceptualised as one of the tactics of governance, which may persuade and encourage individuals to adjust their behaviour in line with the sector's objectives (Loveday, 2018, Adams et al., 2009, p. 249, as cited in) as an 'anticipatory regime', used to interpellate and regulate subjects.

Anxiety about GESI in the WASH sector is an uncertainty deliberately created to operate on the mind and body as a disciplinary and disciplining practice, and it operates, both in the affective and somatic registers, through feelings of anxiety. Neurotic citizens are those who regulate themselves through responses to anxiety and uncertainty (Isin, 2004, p. 223, as cited in Loveday, 2018, pp. 7–10). The drive to improve clean living habits and safe sanitation can cause anxiety. However, anxiety itself then plays an active role in governance, so that anxiety is not merely a residual effect but shapes the subjectivity of safe sanitation. Anxiety, then, acts as a tool in achieving the disciplinary goal of safe sanitation, and those who do not meet the required standards — or who fail to 'overcome' them — are labelled as slum dwellers, unclean, and so on. Neurotic citizens experience anxiety triggered by a sense of insecurity when they are unable to align with safe sanitation principles, as their capacity to achieve safe sanitation goals is limited. Significantly, the shift from neurotic subjectivity to citizenship involves responding to calls to adjust behaviour not through calculated habits but by managing anxiety and insecurity (Isin, 2004, p. 226, as cited in Loveday, 2018, pp. 7–10).

This analysis is crucial: how the body becomes the foundation of hierarchy in life, regulating differences in treatment of humans and the development process. The concept of differentiation becomes significant as a reflection of power relations in discussions of equality and justice, aiming to dismantle the existence of groups considered inferior. Before the Enlightenment in Western Europe, anatomists understood male and female bodies as non-dualistic; they were not opposites but rather variations on a single theme (Love, 2008, Howson, 2004, p. 43, as cited in). However, after 1800, there was a shift in anatomical studies, from non-hierarchical and non-binary representations of the female anatomy to hierarchical and binary representations that emphasised differences, portraying women as weaker, driven by social and political forces to exclude women from the new public sphere of the bourgeoisie (Love, 2008, Howson, 2004, p. 46, as cited in). Gender is constructed from the body as 'two hierarchical so-

cial essences', thereby giving the body meaning, utility, and functions that legitimise dominant relationships (Love, 2008, Bourdieu, 2001, p. 23, as cited in).

10 Conclusion

In this section, the researcher attempts to answer the research questions regarding how the GESI discourse hierarchy creates passive subjects among vulnerable groups in GESI WASH programs and the effects of this discourse, particularly on people with disabilities. GESI discourse in the WASH sector classifies the world into populations and individuals who are in good WASH conditions and those who are vulnerable. This classification serves as a hierarchical structure of knowledge that attempts to test the truth of inclusive development. The truth of inclusivity needs to be implemented in development to transform the governance of the WASH sector and regulate clean living for the population. Populations with minimal access to WASH, who are part of vulnerable groups, tend to be passive throughout the process of WASH internalisation, lacking autonomy over their circumstances. People with disabilities have experienced oppression as a vulnerable group since earlier times, in development policies on education, employment, income, and other aspects of life. "Yes, we are a vulnerable group, whose needs should be understood" is a passive statement made by subjects to be understood as human beings who require assistance. This presents a challenge to the truth of inclusive development, which should encompass everyone, yet inadvertently marginalises them.

Furthermore, the discourse process shapes the GESI WASH subject. First, the passive subject of vulnerable groups is formed through discursive practices. Discursive practices work through the formation of objects, whereby GESI discourse shapes how an object is understood and treated. The term 'people with disabilities' replaced the previous term 'people with impairments'. The term 'people with impairments' emphasises physical deficiencies that affect specific communities, prompting a societal understanding that these impairments necessitate special attention, assistance, and priority. Although there has been a more sensitive change in terminology to 'people with disabilities', the focus on disability has already shaped knowledge that is internalised in policies and at the micro level, in the form of social norms and how individuals behave towards disability. The GESI discourse shapes the understanding that inclusive development, which includes and recognises the existence of vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities, is needed to support safe WASH services. These statements of knowledge are conveyed by gender and WASH experts, ensuring that knowledge is continually reproduced to ensure the smooth operation of GESI WASH programs. However, this knowledge is confronted with self-knowledge, as individuals are often seen in terms of their physical limitations. This results in a hierarchy of knowledge about physical limitations and discrimination against people with certain conditions. Furthermore, intersectionality, due to the intersection of various identities, such as gender, religion, ethnicity, economic status, and physical condition in a single person with a disability, creates increasingly complex internal conflicts.

Second, the agenda regarding coercive, institutionalised, and largely invisible practices of control over subjects. GESI in the WASH sector for people with disabilities produces knowledge that supports categorisation as a vulnerable group, which in turn becomes the basis for policies and programs. Unbeknownst to them, gender and disability subjects are regulated and disciplined through GESI WASH discourse pre-

cisely because their bodies are considered different, i.e., as vulnerable groups rather than empowered subjects. The principles of equality and social inclusion are questioned, as persons with disabilities face hierarchical structures that foster feelings of marginalisation and anxiety. The feeling of marginalisation stems from the inability to play a more active role in society as natural leaders in the WASH sector, such as advocating for clean and healthy living behaviours. The anxiety arises because, instead of being autonomous subjects, they are constantly categorised as passive members of vulnerable groups. The truth of inclusivity presents them as vulnerable groups solely.

Third, the process of subjectivization as a practice for persons with disabilities concerns oneself as a freedom to understand oneself in GESI WASH practices, even to participate in providing GESI WASH education to the community. This freedom to be active is within the framework of compliance with GESI discourse discipline. Passive subjects in this context are formed because people practice GESI WASH sincerely, unconsciously, and unspoken, as provided by society, within the discourse that is beneficial for individuals to know themselves, improve their abilities, and transcend themselves, leaving them no choice but to learn, internalise, and apply GESI WASH.

Based on these conclusions, the discourse hierarchy in GESI WASH knowledge ultimately reinforces the discourse hierarchy that people with disabilities are a vulnerable group when GESI WASH conditions are poor. Furthermore, do people with disabilities not have autonomy over their bodies? According to the researchers, development requires a wise approach in mapping issues to determine targets for change in specific community groups. Additionally, development mechanisms need to create public spaces to articulate diverse knowledge and perspectives.

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Democracy dies in conceptual darkness. How the innocuous left-right metaphor leads to deceptive ideational hierarchies and democratic backsliding

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Abstract

The democratic backsliding of the past decades has been widely described and explained by general disillusionment due to economic inequality and insecurity, by the global rise and appeal of non-democratic great-powers, and by populist politicians spreading simplistic messages and disinformation made easier by non-traditional media. The process has also been connected to the rise of illiberalism, although political ideas have often been characterised as mere tools for political rhetoric rather than genuine drivers of the transformation. This article argues that political ideas indeed had an important effect. Focusing on Hungary's post-1989 course, it shows that the combination of mainstream liberal descriptions (which practically equate democratic and liberal backsliding) with critical narratives (which emphasize the free market centric and elitist nature of the pre-2010 politics) provide a remarkably coherent description of a Polányi type countermovement from the overly liberal 1990s to an era that can be described, with the words of István Bibó, as anti-democratic nationalism. The article demonstrates how the traditional left-right spatial metaphor does more to confuse than to explain this ideological shift, and the misleading effect of its application even exacerbates democratic backsliding. It also offers an alternative three-dimensional spatial model with the potential to more accurately frame the relationship between major political ideologies (including nationalism) and to better understand how political ideas support or undermine democracy.

Keywords: *democracy, backsliding, political left and right, liberalism, nationalism.*

Motto
"Please step forward to the rear!"[1]

1 Introduction

Based on his understanding of human nature, the decay of democracy into tyranny was a completely natural process for Plato. And yet, almost two and a half millennia later, after a global surge in democracy, the subsequent backsliding came as an unexpected shock for contemporary political scientists. A long series of explanations and narratives has been constructed, and the analytical process does not seem to be concluded. There is a cacophony of contributing factors identified by the expanding

[1] This request was the motto of a sarcastic piece of the eminent Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, titled How to be a Conservative-Liberal-Socialist (Kolakowski, 1978). Not only is the quoted sentence he heard on a tramcar in Warsaw quite fitting to describe the recent political course of Hungary, the topic of his essay also is: the actual compatibility of these three important political traditions and a mighty new International synthetizing them, which however "will never exist because it cannot promise people that they will be happy".

literature, some focus more on the machinations of anti-establishment populist politicians (Casal Bértoa & Rama, 2021; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Carothers & Hartnett, 2024) others the general disillusionment with rising inequalities (Rau & Stokes, 2025), or the changing modes of social communication (Diamond, 2019), or cultural shocks caused by immigration (Kapelner, 2024).

The following article intends to contribute to another subset of this discourse, one that focuses on the roles of political ideas. Narratives in this category often invoke right-wing populism, nationalism, and illiberalism as connected to de-democratisation. But they usually treat these political phenomena as elements of a rhetorical mode or discourse type that serves as a means for certain politicians to grab or keep the power, not as a substantial intellectual framework or an ideology that directly contributes to the backslide (see, Aslanidis, 2015; Dai & Kustov, 2022). By contrast, I will start from the assumption that political ideas matter – they are driving forces during democratisation and autocratization alike.

I will focus on Hungary as a single but emblematic case, a country that, in recent decades, presented itself as a regional pioneer in democratisation and then in autocratisation. In 1989–1990, Hungary quickly became a democracy. In the 2010s, as shown by a long list of analyses by political scientists (e.g. Ágh, 2015), think tanks (V-Dem Institute, 2020), and the European Parliament (Committee on Civil Liberties and Justice and Home Affairs, 2022), Hungary became a hybrid regime of electoral autocracy. I do not aim to write an event history of the post-1989 transformation, nor to analyse Viktor Orbán's political system. My aim is rather to analyse academic and political narratives of the Hungarian post-1989 transformation process from the perspective of how they describe the relationship between political ideologies and democracy. I will divide the narratives into two categories: the mainstream liberal ones (scholarly or political), which generally tend to identify a serious democratic backslide beginning with the second Fidesz government after 2010, and the critical ones (anti-capitalist or sovereigntist), which emphasise serious aspects of democratic deficit in the previous two decades due to the reckless policy application of the liberal ideology.

I want to point out that while liberal accounts of the transformation practically equate liberalism with democracy (talking of erosion of democracy as a liberalism-illiberalism shift), a combination of the two narrative types provides a more accurate account of the developments, which takes into account not just the nature of the illiberal pull, but also causes for the push away from more liberal politics. These include an overreliance on the economic benefits and effectiveness of liberal market mechanisms and an underappreciation of social traditions and values, which resulted in a substantial and long-lasting shift in popularity.

I also want to highlight that both narrative types struggle to adequately conceptualise the political-ideological nature of the transformation, largely because they base it on the left-right spatial model. Liberal accounts, for instance, struggle to make sense of the etatism (centralisation efforts) of a nominally right-wing government and sometimes frame it as a turn back toward Communism, while sovereigntist narratives describe market-oriented policies as based on post-Communist left-wing ideas. In a critical leftist description, both political forces that dominated the scene since the 1990 parliamentary elections (and both political periods) are labelled as right-wing neoliberalism.

In the following, I first summarise the liberal mainstream framing of the Hungarian transformation process, then the critical accounts of it. By liberal framing, I mean those

narratives that describe the reform process in and around 1989 as primarily a transformation from dictatorship towards a constitutional democratic system of checks and balances, respect for individual rights and civil liberties, free speech and free multiparty elections. Critical accounts view the essence of the Hungarian Annus Mirabilis as a transformation either from a state-socialist planned economy to capitalism or from Soviet imperial dominance to national sovereignty. Both streams tend to be much more critical of the 1990s and the 2000s than the liberal accounts. In the third part, I will describe what a more inclusive (combined) narrative would look like and explain why it is so deeply misleading if its core elements (the rise of illiberalism, growing nationalism, and democratic backsliding) are explained on a single axis (as a simple left-right ideological shift). Finally, I will propose a more elucidatory model of the relationship between democracy and the main political ideologies, one that does not prioritise liberalism as the democratic core and does not downgrade nationalism as a 'thin-centred' ideology. The proposed model provides a better conceptual framework to understand the past decades of Hungary, but more generally also to protect democracy and reverse the democratic backslide.

2 The liberal framing of the post-1989 Hungarian trajectory

In this first part, I will analyse the main ideas in what I will call 'liberal narratives', ones which generally positively valorise the two post-1989 decades as the 20 years of liberal democracy in Hungary and view the subsequent 15 years as a deviation from the main liberal democratic norms (a democratic backsliding). Many of these pieces were written as a critique of Orbán's autocratic turn. Some of the authors were politically involved as liberal politicians during the 1990s, like János Kis, Bálint Magyar, Lajos Bokros, András Bozóki, Péter Tölgyessy; the latter two were even affiliated with Fidesz for certain periods. Quite a few work(ed) in academia (e.g., philosopher János Kis, economist János Kornai, historian Balázs Trencsényi, political scientists András Bozóki and Zsolt Enyedi). The aim is not to provide a comprehensive or comparative summary, but rather to look for the generally held views about the role of ideology in the backsliding, shed light on the conceptualisation of the main political ideologies (liberalism, socialism, nationalism and conservatism), and their relation to each other and to democracy itself.

The Hungarian liberal narratives about the post-1989 overall democratic trajectory of the country hold that democracy came to Hungary in (and around) 1989–1990, while its serious deterioration can be connected to the establishment of the second Fidesz government in 2010. As a prime example, eminent economist János Kornai, the late professor emeritus of Harvard University and Corvinus University in Budapest, described the Hungarian course this way: 'For two decades, Hungary, like the other Eastern European countries, followed a general policy of establishing and strengthening the institutions of democracy, rule of law, and a market economy based on private property. However, since the elections of 2010, when Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party came to power, Hungary has made a dramatic U-turn' (Kornai, 2015). The author had already announced that Hungary is no longer a democracy but an autocracy four years earlier in an opinion piece (Kornai, 2011). Many others use the term 'hybrid regime' to describe Orbánism, and believe that it became consolidated only later, with one of the crucial steps being the coming into effect of the Fidesz-drafted new constitution on the first day of 2012 (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018, p. 40).

Pre-2010 democracy and liberalism go hand in hand in these accounts – quite a few authors indeed refer to the system as liberal democracy (e.g. Bozóki, 2012, Magyar, 2016[2], Halmai 2024) with rule of law mechanisms, constitutional limits on power, system of checks and balances, freedom of speech, etc. Accordingly, the essence of the transformation around 2010 is not just de-democratisation but also one from a liberal to an illiberal (or anti-liberal) regime. András Bozóki, for example, talks of an 'anti-liberal, anti-democratic turn' to describe policies of the new government at the time when 'democracy fell into a crisis in Hungary' (Bozóki, 2012).

Kornai details the following main elements for the downturn: 'the executive and legislative branches are no longer separate' (both effectively controlled by Viktor Orbán); the basic institutions of the rule of law have been abolished or significantly weakened ('the holders of power are able to elevate any decision to the status of law quickly and without hindrance'); the ruling political group makes attempts to take control over the courts while the prosecution works suspiciously more effectively against people in the opposition;" 'private property has become the target of frequent legal economic and ideological attacks';tendencies of centralization effects almost all spheres of society; civil society is harassed and concerns of the people expressed through declarations or demonstrations are disregarded (Kornai, 2015, pp. 4–6). These elements recur in all accounts, with varying emphasis on the loss of specific liberal aspects: constitutional checks and balances (e.g., Halmai, 2024; Kis, 2013), the primacy of the free market (Lajos Bokros in Trencsényi 2017, p. 21), and political pluralism, among others (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018).

While there are no substantial differences in the general description of the 1990–2010 regime (liberal and democratic), the ideological nature of the new 'illiberal' and 'antidemocratic'regime, or the ideational roots of its triumph, is surprisingly disputed. There are those who connect the new Hungarian right wing with the pre-1945 one (seeing either substantial similarity or just a longue durée socio-cultural basis for the popular acceptance of Orbán's 'System of National Cooperation'). According to János Kis, 'The right-wing's Horthy-ist nostalgia made it easier for the left to find the anti-democratic communist regime justified; and the left's nostalgia for Kádár's 'consolidation' made it easier for the right to rehabilitate the 'Christian course' as a crusade against the communist dictatorship (Kis, 2013). Implicit in this description is the assumption that a small liberal-democratic political force was squeezed between two large blocks with anachronistic socialist and conservative-nationalist ideologies, respectively.

János Kornai did not want to systematically analyze the causes which brought about the U-turn, but he also mentioned a few historical factors that shape contemporary anti-liberal political-ideological thinking: 'goulash-communism, when the population became accustomed to the paternalism of a heavy-handed regime' and 'nationalist, racist, anti-Semitic ideology of the autocracy of the Horthy period of 1919 to 1945, with its foreign policy that prioritized the revision of the unjust dismemberment of the country after the First World War, turning Hungary into a loyal ally – to the bitter end – of Hitler' (Kornai, 2015). As for the characteristics of the regime, he noted that 'the Orbán government is not Socialist', but its efforts at centralization, its anti-capitalist rhetorics and policy steps still represent a shift back towards the

[2] Later, refining his ideas in joint works with Bálint Madlovics, the same author, Bálint Magyar claims that Hungary had been a liberal democracy only until 2002, and the following eight years it was closer to what they call a patronal democracy. (Magyar & Madlovics, 2020)

Socialist system and are detrimental to the economy, just like attempts at national isolationism and autarchy or the 'nationalization of private pension funds' which 'dealt a heavy blow to the principle of respect for private property' (Kornai, 2015).

Five years into the U-turn, historian Balázs Trencsényi identified three types of well-developed interpretative frameworks for the Hungarian backsliding (Trencsényi 2015). One was former dissident Rudolf Ungváry's model of a 'fascistoid mutation', which has its charismatic-authoritarian vision and nationalist rhetoric and satisfies with it the habits and needs of a society formerly characterized by rural, patriarchal, right-wing masses and the Christian middle class, which had made their own compromise with existing socialism, and is frightened by civil-liberal-capitalist modernity after 1989. Liberal politician turned political analyst Péter Tölgyessy's interpretation is of a 'directed national capitalism' that fits well a frustrated society's aversion to capitalism and desire for respect and greatness. And former liberal finance minister Lajos Bokros's narrative of a post-2010 'restoration of the communist command economy system', based on Orbán's presumed hostility toward capitalism and markets (Trencsényi, 2015).

Bálint Magyar classified the historical analogies to describe and explain Orbánism as: neo-communism (those that focus on centralisation and nationalisation), fascistoid system (those that find similarities with the Horthy regime or corporatist pre-war regimes), and neopatrimonial or reincarnated feudal system (that describes a certain kind of vassalage structure) (Magyar, 2016, p. 61). Yet, in his argument, all of these frameworks are misleading, among other reasons, because Orbán's system – which is essentially a more modern and unique phenomenon (a post-Communist mafia state) – is non-ideological but also because true power and legitimacy do not overlap (Magyar, 2016, pp. 61–62). In Magyar's interpretation, presented in a series of books (beginning with Magyar, 2015), assumes that the post-2010 Hungarian political system should not be described as a flawed democracy or a system anywhere between dictatorship and democracy (hybrid regime or other) but a completely different category: a patronal autocracy (or post-communist mafia state) (for a detailed description of the system and Hungary's trajectory see Magyar & Madlovics, 2020).

In sum, while not idealising the 1990–2010 period, liberal narratives of the post-1989 era of Hungary agree that it was characterised by a functioning liberal-democratic system, but that this was followed by a democratic decline firmly connected to anti-liberal tendencies. They are less in unison in describing the ideational characteristics of the new regime. There is much confusion about what the post-2010 regime is like, aside from what it is not: it is illiberal (or anti-liberal) and autocratic (anti-democratic). Liberal authors characterise the democratic backslide as caused at least partly by Communist and nationalist delusions stemming from past social experiences and traumas, and similarly describe post-2010 developments as political (and, to an extent, economic) re-centralisation, in some accounts even as neo-fascism or neo-communism. While the Fidesz regime is often regarded as pragmatic and lacking a clear ideology, its rhetoric and policy steps are usually presented as serious right-wing (and at times left-wing) deviations from the 'liberal centre' that threaten(ed) Hungarian democracy.

3 Progressive-egalitarian and sovereigntist approaches

Contrary to liberal framing of the post-1989 Hungarian political trajectory, progressive-egalitarian and sovereigntist narratives are much more critical of the first two 'liberal'

decades, and do not connect liberal ideas with democracy. They also see 1989 through a different lens: for the progressives (sometimes labelled critical left), the transformation from socialism to capitalism is at least as important as the one from dictatorship to democracy, for the sovereigntists (or: identitarians, nationalists), the main theme is national liberation from imperial oppression, the regaining of national sovereignty and independence.

Members of the first group usually acknowledge democratic backsliding but point to serious social problems stemming from (neo)liberal economic policies that overshadow – and, to an extent, explain – Orbán's rise to power. In his essay on historiographies of 1989, historian János Rainer identifies a group of authors who partly based their criticism on Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system theory, partly on the moral judgement that the systemic transformation benefited mostly a narrow upper echelon of society, but mainly 'international capital'. Rainer quotes two media articles written by political philosopher Gáspár Miklós Tamás, a conservative liberal-turned radical critic of the Hungarian transformation. In one, from 2014, Tamás claims that instead of establishing a flourishing market economy, privatisation resulted in deindustrialisation, which destroyed a world that offered to the workers a modest wage and accommodation, but also a home, an aim, a meaning (Rainer 2019, pp. 27–28). In an article published five years later, Tamás goes even further, claiming that the pre-1989 system was economically and socially more just than the contemporary one (Rainer, 2020, p. 32).

A crucial motive of leftist criticism is the insensitive behaviour of the political elite toward those who were losers of the transition. Erzsébet Szalai writes the following about intellectuals 'calling themselves liberals' (for Szalai they are rather neo-liberals): 'They were the ones to provide ideology for the full, uncritical, reckless opening up of the economy in front of the mammoth-ownership to whom the price of labor has always been too high (...) and who urge the total marketization of the remaining public sphere' (Szalai, 2009, p. 213). As Péter Rauschenberger argues, the downfall of the republic occurred because, according to the assessment of too many citizens, it failed to deliver the public policy outcomes that could have been expected of it (Rauschenberger, 2013). To Gábor Scheiring, this is just one factor. He claims that the rise of illiberalism is tightly connected to the 'exhaustion of the political economy of patience' and to the polarisation of the economic elite and the 'needs and interests of the native capitalist class' (Scheiring, 2015).

The post-2010 regime, in these accounts, is not better at creating more equitable, welfare-focused policies. It rather created an autocratic political system based on national capitalism (an 'alliance of state autocracy and neoliberal capitalism' in the words of Attila Antal, 2019). In these descriptions, where the interest of capitalists and the re-arrangement of capital are central themes), the new regime's economic policies are characterised as essentially neomercantilist and aimed at strengthening the national bourgeoisie (see, Gerőcs, 2021).

Sovereigntist narratives are similarly critical of the pre-2010 period, but view Orbán's 'revolution of the ballot boxes' and the subsequent creation of the 'System of National Cooperation' as a correction and remedy for most of the ills of the previous regimes[3]. As Márton Békés, director of the pro-government XXI Századi Intézet (XXI

[3] It must be noted that there had already been an Orbán and Fidesz led government in 1998–2002, but this is usually not emphasized in these accounts, or if yes, the implicit partial responsibility is explained away by pointing out that without a two-third majority, that government's transformative power was limited and its

Century Institute, a history research think tank), explains, the 2010s were the period of the 'global breakdown of the post-bipolar era' with the promise of a post-liberal period and an 'accompanying phenomenon of a sovereigntist wave' (e.g. Brexit and Donald Trump's presidency) – and the Hungarian system was a pioneer and still is a model for the new era (Békés, 2021).

Such contemporary sovereigntist thinking has a long history: they were gradually developed throughout the 2000s by intellectual networks around Fidesz and the Századvég Foundation, as shown by a rare academic piece that takes the ideational aspects of the Hungarian backsliding seriously (Buzogány & Varga, 2018). A core idea is the essential similarity of Communism and Liberalism, or its Hungarian adherents. A telltale essay published before the crucial 2010 transformation unites the left and the liberal camp as the 'progressives', the opposite of the 'internalists' with whom the authors clearly identify (Fodor & Kern, 2009). Questioning what they call a progressive assumption that those two decades of post-Communism show a clear break away from Communism, they largely agree with those who talk about the 'abortive and incomplete nature of the regime change' (Fodor & Kern, 2009, p. 119). This is because – as the article claims – liberals show weird similarities to communists in that they both believe in linear progressivism, both apply a crisis narrative, both argue for the need for a complete regime change, and both want to copy an existing foreign system. 'On the other hand, the authors acknowledge the fact that there still was a great shift in Hungarian political history in 1989 and declare that 'we have no intention of starting a new revolution' (Fodor & Kern, 2009, p. 119)[4].

While, according to G Fodor, the 'progressive approach' sees 'joining the West' and 'copying Western institutions and procedures' as the purpose of the transition; the internalist approach wants the "'foundation of the state', identity politics, including the issue of national independence; a clear definition of national interest; willingness to get into a conflict in order to protect national interests" (Fodor & Kern, 2009, p. 127). It is quite remarkable to note again that just one year later, Fidesz really started to implement clearly related policies. 'Liberal democracy was not capable of openly declaring, or even obliging, governments with constitutional power to declare that they should serve national interests. Moreover, it even questioned the existence of national interests', stated Orbán in 2014. (Berend, 2020, p. 281). Democracy per se is seldom put in a negative light in political discourses of Fidesz, but liberalism is, to the point that Viktor Orbán famously put 'illiberalism' on the banner a decade ago, and ever since. What is usually viewed in Hungary as the anti-democratic phenomenon of corruption is famously re-framed by András Lánczi as a deliberate policy of Fidesz aimed at social-economic restructuring of the country, similar to what happened after 1945 and after 1989, diverting of capital to a 'domestic entrepreneurial stratum' (Lánczi, 2015).

All in all, these alternative accounts question the basics of the liberal narrative. Sovereigntist (internalist) accounts, whose promoters are, in general, supporters, political allies, or members of the contemporary Fidesz regime, naturally do not talk of a democratic decline after 2010, but, in turn, find faults with the previous 20 years. Instead of an inverted U curve, they describe a generally rising period in which both 1989 and 2010 represent positive (upward) steps toward nation-centred governance

achievements could not be enough far-reaching.

[4] This claim is notable, because it happens to be in stark contrast with Orbán's declaration just a year later, that the overwhelming Fidesz victory means a revolution at the ballot boxes which was then referred to as the basis for establishing the new "System of National Cooperation". (Országgyűlés, 2010)

and sovereignty. Critical left authors, on the other hand, problematize the whole period of post-1989 as a period of social injustices, poverty, and rising inequality – characteristics of capitalism. In both types, the issue of democracy is either sidelined or understood less in terms of the procedures of free and fair elections, a constitutional system of checks and balances, or civic rights, and more as a system characterised by positive outcomes that benefit the people or the nation. Liberalism ceases to have positive value, and its relation to democracy (broadly understood as governance for the people, by the people) is neutral or even inverse.

4 The post-1989 Hungarian political trajectory and ideational hierarchies created by the left-right spatial metaphor

In the first two parts, I briefly characterised the liberal and critical narrative streams of the Hungarian post-1989 political course. In this part, I will argue that they all grasp some elements of truth, and that, taken as complementary observations, they can be meaningfully combined into a fitting unified description of the actual political trajectory. I will also show how this trajectory cannot be adequately fitted within the mainstream cognitive model of the political-ideational space, namely the left-right spectrum. I will also argue that the trajectory was indeed influenced by the inappropriateness of existing models, which, somewhat paradoxically, supported both liberal and nationalist exceptionalism.

In line with the liberal interpretation, democratic backsliding was clearly underway between 2010 and 2026, as reflected in the extraordinary centralisation of political and economic power in the country. A long list of independent analysts and think tanks shows this[5]. On the other hand, the critics of liberals also seem to be right in pointing out that the illiberal (sovereigntist) turn can be described as an attempted (or promised or implemented) shift from a position of over-liberalism (nationality-blind, open, (neo)liberal capitalism) to which the disappointment and the backslide can – at least partially – be attributed.

In line with the Washington Consensus atmosphere, the political elite in the Visegrad countries were generally convinced that the effective functioning of the economy requires deregulation, trade liberalisation, and privatisation. It was also widely believed that governments should act quickly before domestic resistance escalates, but to the surprise of international observers, the liberal fervour lasted long and went way deeper than in the West with 'radical neoliberal reforms' like flat tax, pension privatisation, the slashing of corporate tax rates, extreme monetarism, and strong central bank independence (Appel & Orenstein, 2018). Hungary was a leading country in East Central Europe in transforming its economic system by introducing elements of market coordination and small-scale private ownership prior to 1989. The country opened up, and by the end of 1995, it attracted as much foreign investment as all the other countries of the former Communist Bloc together (Pogátsa, 2009). In the years preceding 2010, based on property rights, government integrity, business freedom, trade freedom, investment freedom, and financial freedom, Hungary was more liberal than the other Visegrad countries, and much more than the EU average (Bohle & Greskovits, 2018, p. 1073).

The transformation came with a tremendous price: a steep rise in the number of

[5] For the backslide of Hungary from consolidated democracy to electoral autocracy and hybrid regime by V-Dem and Freedom House, see: Halmai (2024, p. 439)

unemployed and inactive, and inequality also grew. This, in part, was a natural consequence of the transformation, but the negative effects were more pronounced in Hungary than in most other transforming countries. Employment rates fell in most countries in the region between 1990 and 1999, but the Hungarian figure fell slightly below 60 per cent, well below those of the other Visegrad countries, the Baltic states, Slovenia, Romania, or Bulgaria (Nesporova, 2002). Special difficulties for Hungary included the debt burden accumulated by the Kádár regime and problems with the methods of privatisation, which were very rapid and relied heavily on attracting foreign capital.

In this situation, it would have been logical to see a turn to economic left-wing ideas, away from the market and toward more redistributive and welfarist policies. This was indeed attempted in 2002 with the 'welfare system change' (jóléti rendszerváltás) promise of the Socialist-led government of Péter Medgyessy, but the actual implementation resulted in an unsustainable economic course. The left had to introduce austerity measures again (like in 1995), and became seen as the real representatives of economic liberalism, which is devastating for the ordinary people. According to Bozóki, the turn toward the nationalist camp (that came with a 'Hungary belongs to the Hungarian message' versus those who seemed to have favored foreign capital) can be explained by a lack of alternatives, because 'nearly by definition, if social solidarity from the politics of the Left is lacking, the values remaining on the side of the road are lifted up by the extreme Right based on ethnic rhetoric' (Bozóki, 2012, p. 34). The ideological nature of the new Fidesz regime is generally identified to be nation-centered (nationalist) by both their critiques and their proponents, though the former like to evaluate it as empty rhetoric for legitimation purposes (Csepeli, 2017), while the latter attributing to it substantial meaning as a more sovereigntist foreign policy, a more home-oriented culture and education policy, and a more protectionist economic policy favoring the national bourgeoisie.

Comparing and contrasting the ideological narratives with the actual policy steps and outcomes reveals that the post-1989 Hungarian transformation process failed on two fronts. First, overreliance on free-market capitalism created unequal conditions and imposed significant difficulties on a large part of the population[6]. Then, partly due to the resulting widespread disappointment, a nationalist-populist government could more easily centralise political decision-making by creating a hybrid regime. Democracy suffered a blow with both steps: first as a 'rule for the people", then also as a 'rule by the people'; that is, first with the creation of serious economic inequalities and hierarchies, then with the centralisation of political decision-making and the

[6] It could also be argued that the turning away from liberalism was not because of faulty policies based on over-marketization, but rather that liberal political and economic principles were not widely popular within the Hungarian electorate. This has also been my interpretation in an earlier essay (Schweitzer, 2014a and 2014b). Similar is the assessment of Bálint Magyar, who quoted survey statistics on values to back it up. „According to a survey in 1991, only 5 per cent of the 30 thousand membership of even the most western oriented, liberal party to have emerged from the anti-communist dissident movement, the Alliance of Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége – SZDSZ) revealed a value system that could be considered consistently liberal in matters concerning human rights and economics – though the party leadership proclaimed such a stance with full determination. A value analysis of liberalism in 2013 on the other hand showed that though the proportion of those considering themselves liberal in Hungary was 14 per cent, and 18 per cent categorized themselves as liberals in matters of human rights, the percentage of those committed to capitalism was a mere 5 per cent. Among the three dimensions of the liberal value system examined by the survey, the number of those who believed in at least two of the three did not even reach 5 per cent. Yet the condition of the stability of western liberal democracy is a broad and cohesive sense of commitment to the values of human rights, the free market and respect for private property, and awareness of this commitment." (Magyar 2016. p. 17.)

creation of political class hierarchies. The overall political-ideological course seems to align with what Karl Polányi described as a double movement: overreliance on market mechanisms results in an anti-democratic backlash (Polanyi et al., 2010).

Without judging whether market-oriented liberal policies were too excessive or beneficial to the Hungarian economy in the first two decades after 1989[7] or if the nationalist/sovereigntist/internalist shift of the Fidesz government was genuine and served national interests in any way, describing the theoretical meaning of such a shift – in relation to the most basic political categories such as left, right, democracy – is not easy. Our usual frames of reference can be confusing. This is why, for some analysts, a liberal-nationalist swing corresponds to a left-to-right movement, while for some others, that linear axis is useless as an interpretative device. Similarly, the shift can mean a pro- or an anti-democratic change for different political commentators.

The left-right divide is a concept that lies at the core of political-ideological thought. It is imagined as an axis that runs from the far left (e.g. Communism) through Socialism, Liberalism, and Conservatism to the far right (Fascism) (Heywood A., 2012, p. 17). The metaphor has serious implications for how political adherents of different ideologies view their respective positions relative to other groups.

The simple left-right cognitive spatial model gives liberals a central position on the spectrum, the furthest away from the two totalitarian extremes. This could provide cognitive backing for the oft-cited 1989 theory that, after the defeat of Fascism and Communism, liberalism is the ultimate winner, since no serious challengers remained. In Hungarian post-1989 politics, this cognitive mapping manifested itself physically as well, as the Liberals – originally the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) and the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz) – got their seats in Parliament between the Socialists and the right-wing parties. But it was also manifested in mental self-positioning: for example, a grouping of Fidesz members in 1992–1993 fought very hard for the 'strategy of the liberal centre' (Szelényi, 2023, p. 45), which effectively meant preventing Fidesz from drifting away 'to the right' from its natural partner, SZDSZ.

An important view suggested by the left-right model is that liberalism (broadly understood to encompass individualism, human rights, constitutional constraints on power, and economic laissez-faire) is the democratic centre per se; it cannot go so far to the extreme as to become anti-democratic. The other side of the coin is to see 'left' or 'right' ideologies as being closer to extreme, totalitarian ideologies. The fact that the Hungarian Socialist Party was a legal successor of the former Communist incumbent (Hungarian Socialist Workers' Pary), and that leading members of the post-1990 right wing coalition party appeared rather forgiving towards 1920–1944 Conservative autocratic leader Miklós Horthy[8] fueled liberal suspicion (apparent in some liberal arguments presented in the first part) that welfare protection or references to national unity are anachronistic (statist or nationalist) deviations from the democratic path.

The left-right cognitive model is partially responsible for creating a false ideational hierarchy: putting liberalism on an undeserved pedestal. It is an example of the misleading qualities of metaphors and the implicit presumption that metaphors depend on preexisting similarities grounded in inherent properties (Lakoff & Johnson, 1981,

[7] For example, in an interview about economic aspects of the transformation Károly Attila Soós, a leading economist of the main liberal party SZDSZ claimed that the early and current accusations about „wild capitalism" are very strong exaggerations, given the low VAT, relatively high level of redistribution (around 50 per cent of GDP), social transfers, and a number of other factors. (Schweitzer, 2020)

[8] Eight government ministers and a series of other dignitaries attended „privately" Miklós Horthy's reburial in Kenderes in 1993. (TSZA, 2008)

p. 215). Equally misleading is the claim that nationalism is not a core ideology because it does not have a fixed place in the left-right model (or in two-dimensional versions that differentiate between economic and political left and right).

Nationalism has a bad reputation that stems from many sources. In the post-1945 Western world, it was reminiscent of the extreme form of fascism. It was also believed to be an ideology of the past, that should be forgotten once its essential program – creating a nation-state – is achieved. Until it became too popular recently, political scientists preferred to use other terms for nation-centred ideas in contemporary politics, such as 'conservatism' or 'populism'. Based on the argument of Michael Freeden, a contemporary doyen of political ideas, nationalism can appear at most as a 'thin-centred ideology' or sometimes no more than 'embellishments of, and sustainers of the features of their host ideologies' (Freeden, 1998). However, the shortcomings he and others have detailed to back up this claim are not very convincing, and should not lead to the disqualification of nationalism. It has been argued that a) nationalism does not have its theorists, b) it does not offer policies to major areas of modern state governance, c) it cannot be associated with any social class, d) it can co-exist with a full range of other ideologies from Socialism and Liberalism to Fascism, and e) it creates an us-versus-them dichotomy. While the first two statements lack validity[9], the last three are true but also hold for other major ideologies.

But, while Hungarian liberals did not bother much in making references to the 'nation', and – influenced by history and political science – looked down on nationalism as either tribal non-ideology or right-wing anachronism, nationalists had a reverse hierarchical ordering. Nationalist groups frequently positioned themselves above the realm of ideological politics, as characterised by the 1990s slogan of MIÉP (Hungarian Justice and Life Party): 'Neither right, nor left, Christian and Hungarian!' (Perdiák J, nd). Other politicians and intellectuals, as was shown in the second part of this paper, usually portrayed liberalism as being next to (almost identical to) socialism and communism, and also as being alien to Hungarian politics.

While pluralism is a constituting element of democracy, polarisation is clearly detrimental to it. Once people denounce 'the other side' more than they value democracy, once they find the victory of 'their camp' more important than the upholding of the freedom and fairness of the election and of other political procedures, nothing can stop the erosion of democracy. This process was led by elite groups who viewed themselves as on a higher pedestal than their ideological rivals. Liberals considered themselves the true champions of democracy and looked down on fellow politicians or intellectuals advocating nation- or social justice-focused policies. Nation- and people-oriented political groups looked at liberals as individualists and elitists who are detached from everyday reality because they are obsessed with ideologies. These made-up ideational hierarchies seem to be partly the creation of the deeply entrenched left-right model, and, in turn, bear some responsibility for polarisation and democratic backslide.

[9] As for general theorists of nationalism, Rousseau is commonly seen as the father of political nationalism, Johann Herder as that of cultural nationalism. As for theorists for particular contexts, German Johann Fichte or Friedrich Jahn, Italian Giuseppe Mazzini, French Charles Maurras, Czech Frantisek Palacky, Hungarian Lajos Kossuth can be mentioned. As for promoted policies, the general aim of benefiting the nation affect all areas of life: foreign policy steps focusing on raw national interests, enhancing national self-determination, sovereignty, security countering multinational or global forces; domestic policies that protect against any kind of separatism but enhance the national unity of the nation; economic policies that protect and boost national industries by subsidies, tariffs, or even by corporatist methods; cultural and identity politics related to cultivating national traditions and the national language, increasing national pride, guarding against foreign influences; etc.

5 Democracy: flattening political hierarchies and balancing among ideologies

In the previous part, I showed how the left-right axis as a spatial metaphor can (and does) lead to conclusions about political ideas – mainly about the characteristics of liberalism and nationalism – that contradict theoretical considerations and empirical observations. A gestalt switch is needed: a more appropriate representation of the relationship among the major ideologies. Such a model should avoid conveying the false message of the centrality of liberalism (both political and economic) and grant a justified place for nationalism (the ideology advocating policies that focus on political, economic, and cultural aspects related to the national community)[10] and for socialism (focusing on welfare, equality, and solidarity).

Democracies in the West are based on all these principles. It was a serious mistake to assume in 1989 that, with the defeat of fascism and communism, liberalism won. The victorious model is based on individual freedom and liberal constitutionalism, but also on welfare, solidarity, and redistribution; and it operates in nation-states with a significant degree of social and cultural cohesion[11].

Liberalism, socialism, and nationalism can be described as equally important ideologies centred on three basic concepts of the French Revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity. These concept-cores define political principles that together constitute prerequisites of democracy (tolerance, (self-)respect; solidarity, justice; social trust and cooperation, respectively). None of the three ideologies should be imagined as having a central position; it is better to imagine them in a triangular arrangement.

This model is an extension of Friedrich Hayek's idea, which focused on the relation of liberalism (or the ideology of freedom) to conservatism (which he understood in a narrow sense, as opposed to drastic change). He emphasised how the picture of a 'line, with the socialists on the left, the conservatives on the right, and the liberals somewhere in the middle' does 'more to obscure than to elucidate' the true relations of the three. 'Nothing could be more misleading. If we want a diagram, it would be more appropriate to arrange them in a triangle with the conservatives occupying one corner, with the socialists pulling toward the second and the liberals toward the third.' (Hayek, 1960, p. 2.). His model was meant to elucidate why liberalism, as the ideology of freedom, is not well placed between socialism and conservatism: while conservatism aims to slow change and socialism pulls toward equality, liberalism pulls in another direction.

Nationalism is no less a distinct and important political ideology than the other three, and it is not any more an in-between ideology than Liberalism. This can serve as the basis for establishing its relative position among the others. If Socialism pulls

[10] he fact that nationalism should not be viewed as antithetical to democracy, but maybe even as constitutive in it, has been emphasized by Hungarian political thinker, István Bibó at a time when it was highly unpopular among similar anti-fascist thinkers: "Democracy and nationalism are movements with the same root, profoundly related" and talked of antidemocratic nationalism as "the greatest monstrosity of modern European political development" (Bibó, 1946, p. 151). Benedict Anderson described nation as an "imagined community" or "fraternity" because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each", it is "always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship". (Anderson, 1991, p. 7.) More recently, Ivan Krastev have also argued that "nationalism – in one form or another – is an organic part of any democratic political scene", and liberals make a serious mistake if they don't acknowledge it for fear (that it leads to nazism or war) or for the hope that it can be defeated like Communism was. (Krastev, 2018)

[11] It must be emphasized that for nationalism to be conducive to democracy it must be working for the whole political community. Ethno-nationalism can be divisive and thus be even detrimental to democracy.

toward equality and Liberalism pulls toward liberty (as Hayek explained), then Nationalism pulls toward fraternity (or national cohesion, the security and well-being of the nation), a third direction.

The four principal ideologies, thus, form a tetrahedron, a three-dimensional object with four independent vertices. This idea is at the heart of my suggested model. (See: Figure 1.)

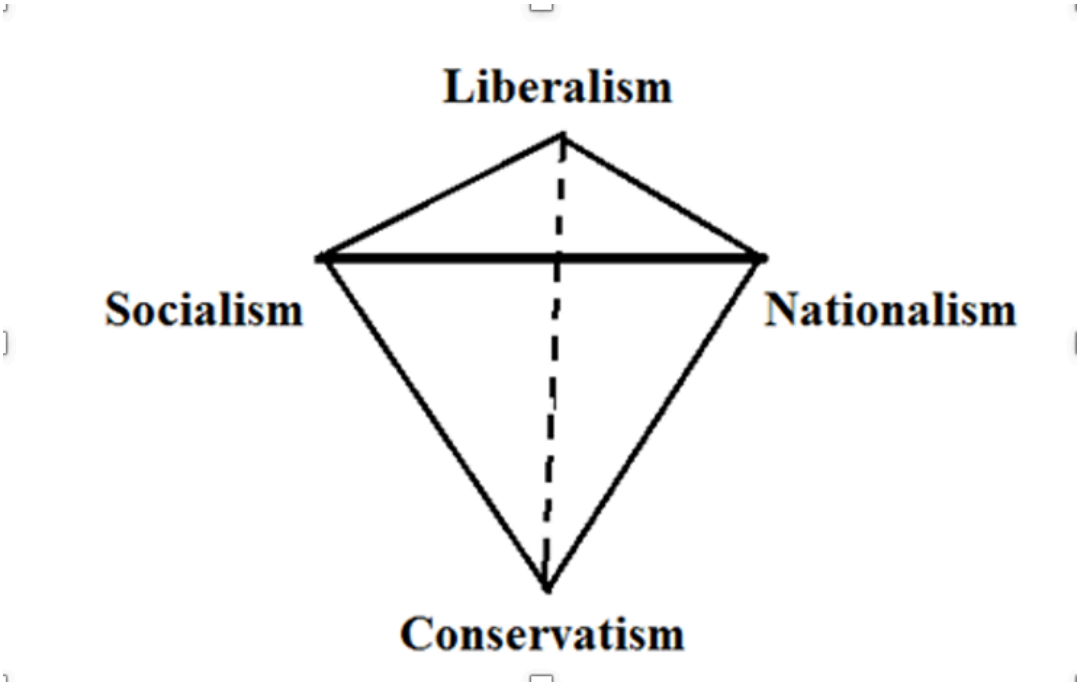

Figure 1 A model of democracy

Source: own illustration.

In the model, the centre of the tetrahedron corresponds to a doctrine that can be reconciled with the idea of democracy. That means a combination of a certain degree of each of the four principal ideologies is needed to support democracy. Without a minimum of social justice and equality (the demand of socialism), democracy lacks the necessary inclusiveness, and people cannot participate in political action. Without basic civil liberties (the goal of liberalism), there can be no open competition, elections cannot be free and fair, and there is no government accountability. Without some identification with the nation (a mark of nationalism), people don't feel they have a common cause for which they should participate in public life. Without a certain level of stability and continuity (the objective of conservatism), democratic rules and norms evaporate. The ideal democratic system, therefore, is supported by a balanced compromise of these ideologies.

The advantages of this three-dimensional model are numerous[12]. With this spatial arrangement of the four ideologies, the imagined value hierarchies between them are flattened. All four ideologies occupy an independent position; no ideology is central.

[12] I have already used the tetrahedron model a few times since I came up with it in the mid-1990s, for example to analyze Czech political transformations in the 20th century (Schweitzer, 2023). Using holistic grading, I measured with it how the ideology of Fidesz shifted in a three-dimensional political space from liberal to nationalist direction (Schweitzer, 2014c).

Nationalism is no longer an outsider of the political-ideological sphere, but an equally important ideology in its own right. Not just nationalism and socialism, but all four have extreme versions (which can be visualised as further from the centre): for conservatism, it is fundamentalism; for liberalism, it is individual anarchism and economic laissez-faire.

The model also eliminates another wrong implication of the one-dimensional left-right political field: that right-wing nationalism and socialism meet halfway at liberalism. What is in between those two ideologies is not liberalism but rather populism. That is the ideology that employs leftist, socialist-like concern for prioritising the people over the ruling elite, and often, at the same time, rightist nationalist discourse against outsiders (equivalent to Rogers Brubaker's horizontal and vertical dimensions of populist discourse; see Brubaker, 2017).

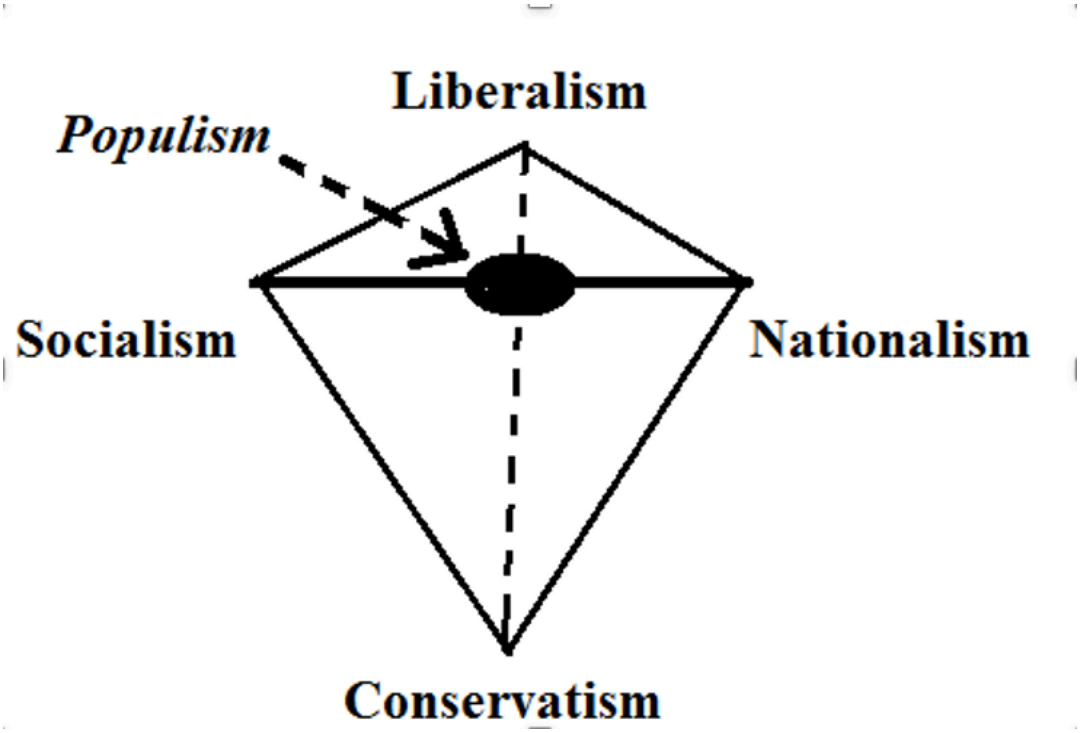

Figure 2 The location of populism

Source: own illustration.

Another serious shortcoming of the mono-axial left-right model is that it covers up three profoundly different practical meanings of the left-right dichotomy, which can be visualised only in three dimensions. One is the original French Revolution meaning: social progress versus conservatism. The second left-right is welfare and redistribution versus (economic) liberalism. The third is universalism and multiculturalism versus nationalism. These three meanings define three distinct right-wing schools: conservatism, liberalism, and nationalism. In real political contexts, within traditional moderate right-wing parties, they are often combined. But they can also appear separately, causing headaches for political analysts who, for example, want to position a party that has conservative and nationalist views but also socialist ones (typical of contemporary illiberal groups).

The model is capable of illustrating political-ideological shifts, including the Hungarian trajectory. 1990–2010 was an era when the ideological positions of successive governments were within the space conducive to democracy, though at times too close to liberalism and further away from the promotion of social solidarity, national cohesion, and social traditions. The swing back, primarily toward nationalism (sovereigntism, economic protectionism, foreign policy realism) but to a lesser extent conservatism and even socialism[13], went too far away from liberalism (e.g. from pluralism or from the principle of constitutional checks and balances) to the point where it ended up being outside the democratic space. The liberal backing is missing for a meaningful democratic system. That is, then, the ideology-based description of what led to a hybrid regime (an extensive concentration of power coupled with centralisation across all walks of life) that called itself the System of National Cooperation. And this is the basis of a possible roadmap to restore democracy in Hungary, and the blueprint to preserve it where it is still alive: ensuring the right balance among moderate political ideologies.

6 Conclusion

The post-1989 political and economic transformation of Hungary has generally coincided with similar global developments. After an initial period that fit within Huntington's third wave of democratisation, a serious backslide followed. Hungary is often depicted in the international media as a notable example of democratic backsliding and hybridisation, which was unexpected, as the country had been a regional forerunner in the liberal-democratic transformation around 1989.

Based on the assumption that focusing on political ideas can help better describe and explain what happened in Hungary (and so many other parts of the world), I have presented three main arguments. First, analysing the Hungarian case, I summarised the mainstream liberal narrative (pointing to democratic backsliding fueled by a nationalist, populist, illiberal turn) and critical narratives (which emphasise the anti-democratic and elitist nature of the previous over-liberal regime), and claimed that both streams should be taken seriously.

Second, I explained why the difficulty in conceptually capturing the transformation (at least partly) stems from the left-right spatial metaphor as the ever-present mental-political framework. It is because it puts liberalism at a high pedestal, as the democratic centre between 'left' (socialism, communism) and 'right' (conservatism, fascism), and therefore it cannot be imagined as too extreme. Nationalism, on the other hand, is imagined outside the political spectrum, either as too primitive, incomplete, shallow as an ideology, or – for its pragmatic adherents – as the down-to-earth, rational way of thinking versus the dogmatic ideologies.

I also presented a more appropriate spatial metaphor, a three-dimensional model that treats all core moderate ideologies, including nationalism, as independent equals. This model has the potential to better describe and explain the political developments of the past decades as a liberal-antiliberal swinging motion. It also points to a political mindset that is needed to restore democracy by establishing its ideational foundation

[13] Almost 20 years ago, Jaques Rupnik detected quite a few policy elements (or political demands) of the anti-liberal, anti-democratic swing-back in East Central Europe: some can be classified as conservative (e. g. anti-abortion, anti-"gender" vs tolerance), some nationalist (e. g. unilateralist foreign policy, national identity vs human rights), others socialist (e. g. demands for reducing inequalities vs „neoliberalism"). (Rupnik, 2007)

as neither liberalism nor nationalism, but the balance of the four main moderate ideologies.

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Abstract

In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a rare bipartisan consensus was formed in the United States as Republicans and Democrats largely equally saw Russia's actions as a 'major threat' to U.S. interests. However, by the 2024 election campaign, this consensus clearly eroded as a growing partisan divergence was observable, increasingly affecting policy outcomes as well. How did domestic polarization undermine the U.S. foreign-policy consensus about Ukraine? Existing research highlights a difference between mainstream and polarization effects: depending on whether elite contestation occurs, higher public awareness can translate into consensus or division of opinion. Still, it is not clear which one is applicable, and how a case can move between the two models. The paper contends that the polarization effect is especially salient when foreign-policy issues are framed in the context of competing internal identities. As domestic polarization has sharpened, contestation over the preferred global role has undermined the articulation of a coherent U.S. policy. Connecting 'internalist' and 'externalist' accounts of ontological security, the paper examines both changes in public opinion and elite discourses on the Ukraine war during the 2024 presidential campaign; highlighting how fears about internal misrecognition spilled over to foreign-policy debates as threatened substate identities are projected into the international sphere. In an era of closely contested elections, such discord may have significant consequences beyond U.S. politics, even transforming global hierarchies.

Keywords: *United States; foreign policy analysis; ontological security; polarization; Ukraine war*

1 Introduction

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, it seemed for a moment that Republicans and Democrats – policymakers and party supporters – can set aside their differences and form a consensus around a strong American response: supporters of both parties equally saw Russia's actions as a 'major threat' to U.S. interests, while dramatic increases in the aid provided to Ukraine were passed by overwhelming bipartisan majorities in both chambers of Congress, 'with few questions asked' (Edmondson & Cochrane, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2022a). More than three years later, this consensus has clearly evaporated. During President Biden's last year in office, it took several months for the Republican-led House of Representatives to adopt an extension to the aid package, and when Speaker Mike Johnson finally scheduled a vote, he had to face a possible revolt within his own party and especially from close associates of Donald Trump (Gorman, 2024; Keating, 2024). Not coincidentally, a clear partisan divide also

emerged in public opinion: whereas 45 per cent of Democrats still found the invasion a major threat (which has only slightly decreased from 2022), among Republicans, this number almost halved, dropping to 26 per cent by the summer of 2024. As U.S. politics headed to the general election campaign, about half of Republicans believed that Americans provided 'too much' support for Ukraine, compared to around 30 per cent of all adults and a meager 13 per cent of Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2024). The growing partisan divide about the war in Ukraine has threatened continuous assistance; moreover, it has also raised doubts about the ability of the U.S. to fulfill its global leadership role more generally.

How did domestic polarization undermine the U.S. foreign policy consensus about Ukraine? The paper argues that internal identity contestations have been projected into the realm of foreign policy and, by framing support for Ukraine in identity terms, have actually exacerbated the divide on both sides. Specifically, these debates have taken place in the context of a domestic war of identities, potentially undermining the coherence and ultimately the credibility of American positions on the global stage. Domestic disputes have never really 'stopped at the water's edge' as strong divisions were visible, for instance, over military involvements in Vietnam and Iraq (see e.g., Pillar, 2023, ch. 5). Nevertheless, as American politics have become increasingly polarized along partisan lines in recent years, internal divisions have also spilled over to foreign-policy issues (Jeong & Quirk, 2019; Myrick, 2021; Schultz, 2017; Smeltz, 2022). Three decades ago, John Zaller (1993, pp. 97-113; 1994, pp. 190-193) found that in cases where there was a consensus among elite actors over a favored foreign-policy course, a *mainstream effect* was observable: support for such policies correlated with individual awareness of the issues. However, when elite contestation occurs, the *polarization effect* comes into force: rising awareness then translates into a growing partisan division in policy perception. This is certainly relevant in the support for aid to Ukraine, especially in an election year when such decisions are extremely politicized. It is still not clear, though, what drives such polarization: recent research has shown how pre-existing distribution of opinions over an issue can determine to what extent public opinion is changeable (Guisinger & Saunders, 2017), but this does not seem to be applicable here because of the original near-consensus about the war. Considering the identity-based sources of polarization can shed light on the processes that drive Americans apart on the conflict.

Scholars have studied extensively the role of public opinion in U.S. foreign-policy making: while, initially, conventional takes have emphasized that the general public has a limited understanding of and interest in foreign affairs, more recently, it was shown that the public can still form structured, coherent opinions (Almond, 1956; Converse, 1964; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1987; Page & Shapiro, 1992).[1] Partisan divisions certainly point to such structured views on Ukraine, yet it remains still unclear whether these simply mirror elite cues, or policymakers themselves are to some extent affected by the expectations of an increasingly polarized electorate. This research does not aim to establish a clear causal direction between public and elite views; nevertheless, the objective is to demonstrate that when foreign-policy issues are framed in the terms of clashing domestic self-identities, Zaller's polarization effect becomes applicable, and a mutually reinforcing loop develops between public and elite contestation. While, for instance, Republicans and Democrats can still agree on seeing China as a rival, in the case of Ukraine the initial consensus was replaced with a deepening identity-driven

[1] For overviews of this literature, see: Holsti, 1996; Sobel, 2001.

split.

Hence, by studying both elite-level discourses and the corresponding shifts in public opinion, this paper aims to connect the internal and external sides of identity contestations. The argument to be outlined draws on the concept of ontological security, namely the idea that individuals and composite actors such as states and substate groups alike strive for stable identities, and such salient identities can be activated under perceptions of threat. In the United States, anxiety over long-term demographic changes induces discourses aimed at protecting supposedly threatened groups while solidifying partisanship (Hajnal, 2020; Jardina, 2019). The domestic side of this phenomenon is quite well researched by now: following results of social identity theory, scholars increasingly understand polarization as being 'affective,' i.e. primarily driven by overlapping group attachments instead of being purely based on policy or ideological differences (Iyengar et al., 2012; Achen & Bartels, 2016; Mason, 2018; but see also Abramowitz, 2018). However, grievances about internal misrecognition (Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021) are also projected into the international sphere because once-dominant but currently status-losing groups equate ontological insecurities to their substate identities with those affecting the identity of a nation perceived to be in decline. In particular, a section of the U.S. electorate – comprising those Republicans who self-identify with the 'MAGA' (Make America Great Again) movement or declare themselves to be strong supporters of Trump – has developed strong attachments to various identity-related political positions, including views on international and foreign-policy issues. When they talk about their desire to 'take back *their* country' while expressing both pride (for U.S. history) and shame (in terms of the country's current prospects), they also favor policies that defend particularistic interests ('America First') against those deemed as 'globalist'. In turn, Democrats on the other side of the identity divide embrace inclusive interpretations of American nationhood and justify their policies in the name of abstract principles such as democracy. From this, I hypothesize that the polarization effect is observable for foreign-policy issues presented in sharp identity terms, because fears about the loss of internal status are projected into the international sphere. As I show below, competing discourses on the Ukraine conflict have increasingly been framed in such terms, thereby deepening dissensus and making any kind of reconciliation unlikely.

From this, the paper proceeds as follows. The next section provides the theoretical foundations for the analysis by building on existing results of ontological security theory and affective polarization. Connecting ontological security's internal and external components, I argue that threatened *substate* identities are projected into the international sphere, instigating visceral foreign-policy attitudes around certain issues. This directs attention to the sources of U.S. polarization, namely, how strong partisan attachment – and equally strong resentment toward the opposing party – increasingly propels divisions over policy issues, including questions of foreign policy. The following section provides a brief overview of how domestic grievances had already been externalized in U.S. politics before Russia's 2022 invasion. The rest of the paper shows how such developments can be illustrated through shifts in support for Ukraine at the levels of domestic preferences and elite discourses. Data from public opinion underscore how the decreasing support for Ukraine is connected to partisan polarization and especially identity-driven attitudes about the global role assumed by the U.S.; whereas an analysis of the discourses of the Biden-Harris administration and of the candidates in the 2024 Republican presidential primaries confirms

how this issue was increasingly framed in line with affective polarization. In conclusion, I show how a mutually reinforcing loop of supply- and demand-side factors has deepened the division over the aid to Ukraine. Namely, by exploiting identity-related grievances, politicians like Trump tap into deep-seated dissatisfaction with existing international arrangements through their divisive rhetoric. Thus, the analysis has clear practical relevance for policymaking: under a new Trump administration, and as the balance of power in Congress remains closely divided, partisan paralysis can further constrain the set of available (acceptable) policy positions, which can also endanger future American commitments beyond Ukraine.

2 Theoretical framework: Ontological security and affective polarization

2.1 Ontological (in)securities in International Relations

Ontological security has become an especially fruitful research area of International Relations in recent years. Introduced to the social sciences by Anthony Giddens, at the heart of it lies the idea that besides physical security, individuals and composite actors also need a relatively stable 'sense of self,' as they require 'a sense of continuity and order in events' to be able to 'keep up with everyday activity' (Giddens, 1991, as cited in Homolar & Scholz, 2019, p. 356). At the international level, it means that states seek ontological security because they also want to maintain a stable identity: this raises the question to what extent we can associate states with a single identity, but, as Jennifer Mitzen (2006, p. 352) noted in one of the earliest uses of the concept for IR, 'society must be cognitively stable in order to secure the identities of individuals, and as such individuals will become attached to these stable identities.' Still, Mitzen's original conceptualization was criticized for homogenizing the state's collective identity, and later formulations also emphasized identity contestation in the process of adopting ontological security (e.g. Steele, 2008, pp. 17–18, 58–60). Therefore, 'internalist' and 'externalist' sides of ontological security research have developed: one focusing on the narratives constructed within states in order to sustain a stable Self, while the other primarily investigates the external interactions through which ontological security can be managed or maintained (Zarakol, 2010; Solomon, 2018, pp. 938–939). As Hall (2022) demonstrates through the example of the omnipresent U.S. rhetoric of 'winning', the analysis of the two sides can be compatible with each other, and the argument below also starts from the assumption that securing substate identities can spill over to foreign-policy actions.

Internal identity contestation becomes most salient in times of crises: in such situations, states may experience ontological insecurity as their stable cognitive environment is questioned and they develop anxieties over the mismatch between the state's self-conception and its externally recognized status or role (Mitzen, 2006, p. 359; cf. Guzzini, 2012, pp. 46–47). Lack of adequate recognition can activate resentment and induce *autobiographical narratives* which aim to stabilize self-identity. While such grievances over misrecognition have mostly been explored at the periphery of the international system or in states which have experienced a loss of status (e.g. Subotić, 2016; Zarakol, 2010, 2011), some of the recent analyses of the resurgence of dominantly right-wing transnational populism have also connected domestic dissatisfaction at the core of the liberal international order to such processes (Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022;

Steele & Homolar, 2019). Adler-Nissen and Zarakol (2021, pp. 614–615) examine actors both at the core and the semiperiphery 'who once had or who tell themselves that they once had some standing, and now feel misrecognized particularly because of a loss of stature, real or imagined, in the recent or distant past.' Such discontent can 'fuel a desire to recover the lost "greatness" of a nation in decline,' appealing to nostalgia about a mythical past in which their nation occupied its deserved position, while within the nation, hierarchies were also seen as 'natural' (Agius et al., 2020, p. 432).

As noted in the literature, anxieties over internal differences are often externalized into outside threats through securitization (Huysmans, 1998; Hall, 2022, p. 3). This is definitely the case when once-dominant groups experience their (relative) loss of status; therefore, 'articulating exclusionary (even fundamentalist) conceptions of identity' can be part of attempts at stabilizing ontological security (Browning & Joenniemi, 2013, p. 496), implying that the crisis of a particular identity is perceived as the crisis of the whole nation. In such situations, longing for the greatness of a bygone era can also manifest in a paradoxical sense of both pride (for the past) and shame (in the present) – shame itself, according to Brent Steele (2008, p. 54), can be seen as 'the radical disconnect produced when national ontological security is disrupted' (cf. Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021, p. 618), while the co-existence of strength and weakness in self-representation can also accompany with what Hagström (2021) describes as 'great power narcissism' in American and Chinese discourses. Nevertheless, such contributions still work at the level of state or national identity – even if this identity can be contested or may remain ambiguous. At the same time, the identity division *within* the state can create grievances among different groups, which can ultimately lead to the projection of internal ontological insecurities to the international sphere. This leads us to the conceptualization of domestic polarization from an identity perspective.

2.2 *Social identity theory and affective polarization*

It has become commonplace to talk about domestic polarization – an increasing divide between Republicans and Democrats in specific issue areas and policy positions (Mason, 2018, p. 17) – in the context of U.S. politics; nevertheless, its precise meaning, and especially its sources, remain debated among experts. Regardless of whether one uses the term *polarization* or *partisan sorting* – the phenomenon that while policy positions of the public generally do not become more extreme, they are increasingly aligned with partisan identity (Fiorina, 2017, pp. 17–29, 67–79) – it is clear that supporters of the two parties are further pulled apart from each other, which requires explanation. Although some authors focus on individual-level factors such as personality traits like authoritarianism (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Stenner & Haidt, 2018), others, like Lilliana Mason (2018, pp. 17–23), argue that, at least in part, 'social polarization' also occurs between Democrats and Republicans. According to social identity theory, pioneered by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner, individuals strive for recognition as members of groups, which can reinforce in-group bias and out-group hostility even when group memberships are decided largely arbitrarily (for applications in political science, see: Iyengar et al., 2012, pp. 406-408; Mason, 2018, pp. 9–16; Achen & Bartels, 2016, pp. 228–231). This logic assumes that partisans do not arrive at policy positions from an ideologically coherent worldview, but rather discern ideology from group attachment; strong partisans are more interested in seeing their side 'winning' (and the hated Other 'losing') than in particular policy outcomes; thus, the

process is also termed 'affective polarization.'

In recent U.S. politics, various social identities have become increasingly fused together, forming what Mason (2018) calls 'mega-identities' around partisanship: '[a] single vote can now indicate a person's partisan preference as well as his or her religion, race, ethnicity, gender, neighborhood, and favorite grocery store' (p. 14). Arguably, the most important element of this development has been the racial realignment (Abramowitz, 2018, pp. 125–131) of the two parties since the civil rights era; furthermore, the election of the first African American president and increasing racial anxieties over demographic changes have activated a sense of white identity among a substantial part of the white electorate (Jardina, 2019; Hajnal, 2020; Sides et al., 2018, pp. 87-90, 165-166). The sorting and polarization around identity categories mean that there are fewer 'cross-pressured' voters whose partisan orientation is not aligned with social group memberships, making negative feelings toward out-group politicians and voters more hostile and seriously constraining the possibilities for political compromise.

However, there are relatively few contributions which explore the foreign-policy impact of affective polarization. Certainly, the divergence between Republicans who tend to favor muscular, unilateralist actions and Democrats who prefer multilateralist, diplomatic solutions is not new, but the dividing lines have arguably become much sharper as supporters of the two parties have formed diverging interpretations of the role they believe the United States should play in international politics.[2] Although some scholars have examined how the relative absence of external threats may have led to higher domestic polarization, and, in turn, how affective polarization may undermine a president's ability to mobilize the public in support of an intervention (Maxey, 2022; Myrick, 2021), the consideration of ontological security at a substate level can further shed light on the process through which certain foreign-policy issues like the Ukraine aid become polarized.

The sorting of the American public into two increasingly all-encompassing groups has raised the stakes of any contestations that can be translated into conflicts over identities. This is exactly what happens when foreign policy issues are interpreted as a choice between 'globalist' and 'America First' solutions, reinforcing zero-sum perceptions about certain disputes. The breakdown of the consensus over basic questions about *what* and *who* makes America great both internally and externally (and whether it had been great in the first place) connects anxieties over threatened substate identities to the fear of status loss at the international stage, resulting in divergent understanding of America's position in the world. From this, a hypothesis can be formed that foreign-policy issues articulated through identity terms will become more contested, thereby activating the polarization effect described by Zaller. In such situations, as the case of Ukraine exemplifies, internal grievances about ontological insecurities are projected into international issues, undermining the possibilities for domestic consensus.

[2] The growing discrepancy between Republican and Democratic attitudes have been clearly demonstrated across many cases, e.g. Friedrichs & Tama, 2022, pp. 771-772; Smeltz, 2022, pp. 789-797. On the connection between authoritarianism as a personality trait and certain foreign-policy positions like militarism, see: Hetherington & Weiler, 2009, pp. 79-83, 97-108.

2.3 Operationalization and methodology

It is not the aim of the current research to draw definitive conclusions about whether pre-existing elite polarization has led to the diverging foreign-policy views of the general public, or, the other way around, whether partisan elite views on certain international issues themselves are rather the results of deeper social divisions. Instead, I intend to show how such polarizing attitudes can be mutually reinforcing, especially when the underlying issue is framed in terms of clashing identities: in some sense, the supply of elite rhetoric fulfills the social demand of affective polarization, thus, public opinion partly follows elite cues, but these cues themselves are conditioned by expectations from partisan audiences. Then, the case study of the Ukraine aid debate in this paper can be seen as a plausibility probe for the above-mentioned hypothesis; the logic of the argument is substantiated, but a more rigorous testing would require a different research design (i.e. a comparison between polarizing and non-polarizing foreign-policy issues) which is beyond the scope of the present paper.

For the purpose of this analysis, the relevant substate identity groups within the United States are Democrats and Republicans, while within the latter group, 'Trump' and 'non-Trump' Republicans are further differentiated. Recent polls have identified around half of Republican voters as 'Trump Republicans' or supporters of the 'MAGA' agenda (Blake, 2023; Smeltz, 2024). The exact wording of the question varies from survey to survey, and the different characterizations might imply slightly different groups, but altogether an increasingly salient, more-or-less stable identity has emerged – even if the size of this group does not amount to more than about one sixth of the general public, they have significant influence on Republican primary elections and their voices are amplified in the right-wing media ecosystem. 'Trump' Republicans also clearly diverge from 'non-Trump' Republicans, Independents and Democrats on specific foreign-policy attitudes: they are less likely to support American involvement in the world, they are more pessimistic about spreading certain values such as democracy, and they are also the ones who are most likely to disagree with continued aid provision to Ukraine (Smeltz, 2024; Smeltz & Kafura, 2024). Then, the ontological insecurities here can be identified as fears of Others, such as migrants, characterizing an 'America First' worldview, which translates into particularistic foreign-policy preferences, whereas Democrats rather champion a universalist American identity centered on the defense of human rights and democracy. (Non-Trump Republicans and Independents, as we will see, are often located somewhere in the middle between the two opposing poles.)

In order to trace the formation of substate identities and to avoid essentializing such collective self-understandings, this paper looks at both demand and supply, manifested in both the grassroots mobilization of a wider audience and in elite-level rhetoric, understood here as the utterances of leading politicians from the major parties. On the demand side, drawing on public opinion data and on contributions from secondary literature – especially ethnographic studies covering the 'MAGA' movement – the objective here is to show how a significant section of the electorate has connected domestic grievances with international issues such as the U.S. support given to Ukraine, further deepening polarization. In terms of the supply of identity-driven rhetoric, I conduct a brief analysis of discourses on Ukraine as they appeared during the 2024 presidential campaign. Following Wæver (2002, p. 29), discourses can be conceived as structures that 'organise knowledge systematically, and thus

delimit what can be said and what not,' which here means uncovering the systems of meanings associated with the Ukraine conflict by major party candidates. With that, we cannot say that certain use of terms directly fueled further polarization, but politicians' choices of words still have consequences, as their interpretations enable certain diverging paths while foreclosing the possibilities for others. But before this analysis, a short review of the relevant literature on the U.S. identity divisions is in order.

3 From 'Mega' to 'MAGA' identities: Externalization of domestic grievances in the U.S. before the Ukraine war

As was mentioned above, Steele (2008) describes shame in connection with the development of national ontological insecurities; however, in the U.S. case, we may instead talk about the disruption of a particular group's ontological security. In the past few decades, a clear divide has emerged between two competing self-understandings, with starkly different implications for the U.S. global role. On the one hand, Democrats often emphasize a steady though uneven progress through American history which also justifies the extensive involvement in international affairs; on the other hand, many Republicans have co-existing feelings of pride and shame, closer to Hagström's 'narcissistic great power' identity. Such divisions and even 'Trump' Republicans did not simply appear with Trump himself, as their attitudes reflect what scholars such as Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williams (2013) had already documented years before the 2016 election in their study of the Tea Party movement: an intense feeling in a segment of the U.S. electorate 'that the United States as they have known is slipping away.' Tea Parties repeatedly talked in a language such as expressing their desire to 'take back *their* country' and fears about 'losing the nation they love, the country they planned to leave to their children and grandchildren' (p. 7).

Public opinion data have also shown an increasingly polarized understanding about anxieties over the loss of global position for the U.S. and nostalgia about its past greatness.[3] For instance, already in 2010, a majority of Tea Party supporters believed that 'America's best years are behind us' (Skocpol & Williamson, 2013, p. 30). Similarly, in her ethnographic study of rural America, Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016, p. 225) points out that Trump's 'supporters have been in mourning for a lost way of life. [...] They yearn to feel pride but instead have felt shame. Their land no longer feels their own.' These articulations of ontological insecurities are triggered by threats to their substate identity due to demographic changes and cultural transformations, especially among those who increasingly see themselves 'strangers in their own land.' This phenomenon is certainly further propelled by the rising salience of white identity: those whites who strongly identify with their racial group 'are especially likely to view themselves as prototypical [Americans], in part because what imbues their group with privileges and status is, in fact, this ability to define what it means to be American' (Jardina, 2019, p. 120). Although white identifiers do not completely overlap with 'Trump' or 'MAGA' Republicans, partisanship is strongly correlated

[3] According to the American Values Surveys, 80 per cent of Republicans but only around half of all Americans and merely a third of Democrats would agree that America 'is in danger of losing its culture and identity' and two thirds of Republicans believe that 'American culture and way of life has mostly changed for the worse' (PRRI, 2021, 2022). The values are even higher for those who 'most trust Fox News' or 'far-right news' so while these surveys do not distinguish between 'Trump' and 'non-Trump' Republicans, it can be assumed that the divergence is primarily driven by the hardcore GOP base.

with the development of 'white consciousness,' a mobilized and politicized form of white identity (Jardina, 2019, p. 40); thus, for our purposes, such racialized identity concerns can indeed be connected to 'Trump' Republicans' ontological insecurities.

Since these threatened groups inflate domestic identity threats to external threats on the whole nation, they articulate specific defensive foreign-policy positions. For instance, Jardina (2019, pp. 207–211) demonstrates that those whites who develop higher racial consciousness tend to oppose globalization and embrace a more isolationist attitude about international affairs. Then, a grievance about a loss of internal status is projected into the perceived loss of status of the United States, which reinforces visceral foreign-policy attitudes that favor particularism ('America First') and defensive pessimism over openness ('globalism') and optimistic value-laden foreign policy (supporting democracy). As the Ukraine conflict was increasingly portrayed in such framing, the continuation of American support was caught in the war between competing domestic identities.

4 How 'America First' took over the GOP: Rising demand for opposition to the Ukraine aid

The polarization effect, as outlined by Zaller (1993, pp. 100-102; 1994, pp. 190-192), does not explain to us why certain issues polarize more than others, and especially how partisan polarization emerges in the first place. Then, it is still puzzling how it became relevant instead of the mainstream effect in the case of Ukraine: after all, one at least could imagine an alternative line of events in which Republicans and Democrats agree to move the aid provision out of political contestation by references to overriding national interests, similarly to how the rivalry with China is treated by bipartisan elites.

In the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion, it indeed seemed that a common ground could be found around the responses to Moscow's behavior. In March 2022, Republicans were actually more likely than Democrats to claim that the U.S. did not provide enough aid to Ukraine, and Russia was seen as a threat by equal proportions within both parties, while there was broad support to work closely with U.S. allies (Pew Research Center, 2022a,b). However, this apparent consensus has concealed the fact that identity-related divisions over such issues were already deeply rooted. Not long before Vladimir Putin's decision, Republicans had a much less favorable view of international institutions like NATO, and they were less likely to hold strongly unfavorable opinions about Russia, perhaps as a result of previous polarizing issues such as the Russian interference in the 2016 elections and subsequent investigations.[4] With the open invasion, attitudes about Russia and NATO became temporarily depolarized, but this did not last long: Pew Research has regularly asked the public about Ukraine aid, and Republican support has already significantly dropped by September 2022. At the beginning of 2023, just before the list of presidential contenders began to formulate, a huge partisan division over Ukraine was already clear: among Republicans, a plurality (40 per cent) believed that the U.S. provided too much aid, while only a much smaller fraction of Democrats (15 per cent) had similar views (Pew Research Center, 2023).

[4] In a 2021 Pew poll, 44 per cent of Republicans, while 77 per cent of Democrats had favorable view of NATO; in 2020, only 32 per cent of Republicans, but 49 per cent of Democrats had very unfavorable opinion on Russia. In the immediate aftermath of the war these numbers have converged, but disagreements later came to surface once again (Pew Research Center, 2022b).

There is further evidence from the 2023 Chicago Council Survey that this growing dissensus was almost entirely due to the rising opposition from those who considered themselves 'Trump' Republicans: whereas 'non-Trump' Republicans' views closely matched those of Independents and the general public, Democrats and 'Trump' Republicans were increasingly located at the two ends of the spectrum. Overall, 63 per cent of Americans wanted to send additional arms and military supplies to the Ukrainian government. Among Democrats, there was an overwhelming (77 per cent) support, which remained practically unchanged from the previous year (79 per cent). The drop was more substantial among Republicans (from 68 to 50 per cent), and this dissent mostly came from 'Trump' Republicans (only 40 per cent of them supported military aid), whereas 'non-Trumpers' (59 per cent) have similar positions to Independents (60 per cent) and to the general public (Smeltz, 2024; Smeltz et al., 2022; Smeltz & Kafura, 2024).[5]

In addition, Trump Republicans have blamed Ukraine's President Zelensky and NATO – or even American policies – for the outbreak of the war in much bigger numbers than either non-Trumpers or Democrats.[6] Moreover, the opposition to the continued support of Ukraine was fused with the already-existing dissatisfaction with international order, which had been documented in the ethnographic works mentioned in the previous section. From this perspective, Zelensky was increasingly seen as the figure supported by 'globalist' elites, while Russia's anti-order behavior was connected to its 'anti-woke' defense of 'traditional values' (which was in fact manifested in its harsh anti-LGBTQ+ policies and in authoritarian ethno-nationalism), something that is especially appealing for elements of the 'MAGA' base. Specifically, as Perry et al. (2023, p. 446) show, Americans who score higher on the Christian nationalism scale – an important part of the pro-Trump coalition – are also more likely to say that 'Vladimir Putin exhibits leadership qualities I respect.' They associate these qualities with the defense of identities that are perceived as being threatened in a 'declining West,' while they reject foreign assistance – helping Others instead of Americans, – especially if it is done in the name of universal values such as providing support for democracy (Pew Research Center, 2025).

Therefore, the fears about threatened identities did not simply activate negative feelings about *any* policies that the out-group proposed and prominent members of the in-group for some reason disputed; these attitudes have been tied to *specific* policies that were understood to prioritize some Others at the expense of the Self, manifested in an exclusionary interpretation of the nation. In contrast to the segment of the Republican electorate that has consistently embraced 'America First', Democrats also found certain domestic ideas and identities (such as being defenders of democracy) to be at stake in the conflict, which found expression in competing political discourses.

5 Competing discourses: The supply-side of the identity-foreign policy nexus

For the following brief analysis, I have looked at mentions of the Ukraine conflict in campaign speeches, other disseminated remarks, official statements, and televised de-

[5] Unfortunately, the 2022 survey did not make a distinction between 'Trump' and 'non-Trump' Republicans to see how their views changed with relation to each other.

[6] There is also qualitative evidence to the 'MAGA' turn against Ukraine and President Zelensky in interviews with attendees of Trump rallies (MSNBC, 2024).

bate performances by major 2024 presidential candidates. For Republican candidates, this was relevant within the time period between the formation of the primary field in early 2023 and the major party conventions in the summer of 2024; however, in the case of Democrats, due to the exceptional situation arising from the late replacement of Joe Biden with Vice President Kamala Harris as the presidential nominee, the Trump-Harris debate is also included here.[7] Texts were collected from *The American Presidency Project*, from transcripts available at *Rev.com*, and from other official sources such as *The White House* website. I have identified the relevant sections discussing the Ukraine conflict and categorized the remarks in terms of the proposed behavior and the identity claims invoked to justify such actions. While due to the limitations of space, this paper can inevitably only provide a glimpse of the full picture, preliminary conclusions can still be drawn based on characteristic differences.

Major candidates can be put into three main categories based on their rhetoric: Democrats, 'traditional' Republicans, and Trumpist / 'MAGA' Republicans, including, first and foremost, Trump himself. While the first two groups mostly agreed on the preferred policy action (i.e. providing substantial military aid to Ukraine), slight differences are observable in the identity components mobilized for action; in contrast, Trump and his followers embraced a markedly different identity discourse, giving rise to policy disagreements as well. On the Democratic side, even with concerns over President Biden's ability to run a campaign before his withdrawal, there has been a continuity on Ukraine: Biden's few challengers have not distanced themselves on an identity dimension, and, following her late entry, Kamala Harris also defended the administration's policies in similar tones as Biden had done before.[8] At the same time, among Republicans, clear divisions came to surface, even if President Trump's renomination was never under serious threat. With 'MAGA' or strongly committed 'Trump' Republicans accounting for around half of those identifying as Republicans, a more competitive primary race would have been possible at least theoretically. Nevertheless, the better organization of the base, divisions among those less likely to support Trump, and most elected Republicans' active or passive acquiescence in Trump's return prevented the emergence of a strong alternative.

In Joe Biden's articulation, supporting Ukraine was closely tied to the U.S. role of global leadership and to the value-laden aim of defending freedom and democracy internationally. Already on the day of the invasion, Biden emphasized how the United States could not tolerate such a blatant violation of a rules-based international order, not only because this is against American interests, but because of basic elements of American identity: Americans 'stand up to bullies,' 'stand up for freedom,' because '[t]his is who we are' (Biden, 2022). Furthermore, in his 2023 State of the Union, Biden (2023a) talked about how the invasion itself was a 'test for America' whether it would 'stand for the most basic principles,' including the defense of democracy against tyranny. In December 2023, standing next to President Zelensky, he reiterated how 'Ukraine and America can strengthen democracy's arsenal' (Biden, 2023b). By this

[7] Donald Trump announced his run for re-election on November 15, 2022, just after the midterm elections, but most other Republican candidates launched their campaigns only in early 2023. The analysis of the Republican field in the first place draws on presidential primary debates, however, because Donald Trump did not participate in those, other remarks also had to be considered.

[8] Apart from the brief attempt by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., to run as a Democrat. However, his later switch to become an Independent candidate before ultimately endorsing Donald Trump and receiving a position in his cabinet is also in line with identity-related polarization, because his views have diverged substantially from those of mainstream Democrats.

time, Biden became increasingly frustrated with the unwillingness in the House of Representatives to consider continued assistance; in his last State of the Union, he directly scolded the Republican majority for 'want[ing] to walk away from our leadership in the world' by blocking the renewed aid package (Biden, 2024).

Biden's themes were further reinforced in Kamala Harris's remarks once she entered the race. In her acceptance speech during the Democratic Convention, she reiterated that as President, she would 'stand strong with Ukraine and our NATO allies' (Harris, 2024). In the debate with Donald Trump, her response about Ukraine also discerned the U.S.'s international role from its identity, showing clear contrast with her opponent: 'The reality is, it has been about standing as America always should, as a leader upholding international rules and norms. As a leader who shows strength, understanding that the alliances we have around the world are dependent on our ability to look out for our friends and not favor our enemies because you adore strongmen instead of caring about democracy' (Rev.com, 2024).

However, the issue of global leadership itself and especially the question of whether the U.S. should defend democracy abroad have become increasingly polarized (Smeltz et al., 2022, pp. 18, 22). Therefore, it is likely that this framing could have further strengthened the attitude divergence between Republicans and Democrats, reinforcing Democrats' belief that assistance to Ukraine is connected to a specific self-understanding of 'being American,' while further moving 'Trump' Republicans away. In this sense, the strong identity-related dimension among those who supported further assistance could inadvertently have undermined the chances of reaching consensus on the subject.

On the Republican side, leading candidates such as Trump and Ron DeSantis were originally not necessarily hostile to supporting Ukraine; they rather argued that the Biden administration did not do enough to deter Russia, which was actually raised in Trump's stump speeches as he still continues to claim up until today – without much evidence – that the attack would not have happened under his watch.[9] Altogether, however, DeSantis and Trump largely avoided the issue of Ukraine aid and rather focused on internal grievances related to culture war issues and the previous presidential election. Nevertheless, already in March 2023, in a response to a questionnaire posed by then-Fox News host Tucker Carlson, Trump claimed that it is *not* the 'vital national strategic interest' of the United States to oppose Russia in Ukraine, 'but it is for Europe,' which justified his position that Europe should pay more for the aid (Carlson, 2023a), and DeSantis also warned against 'becoming further entangled in a territorial dispute between Ukraine and Russia' (Carlson, 2023b). In a CNN townhall later in May, Trump further distanced himself from more aid to Ukraine, arguing that Americans were 'giving away so much equipment' so they 'don't have ammunitions for [them]selves' (CNN.com, 2023).[10] By September, the DeSantis campaign also boasted how his position on Ukraine – compared to others such as Nikki Haley and Mike Pence – was 'most in line with what GOP voters actually believe' (DeSantis, 2023), suggesting that here the expectations about preferences among the base at least partially played a role in formulating a response.

Similarly to how 'non-Trump' and 'Trump' Republican supporters divide on this

[9] E.g. Trump (2023a) said in a January 2024 Iowa town hall that 'It would've never happened. And it didn't happen. And it was unthinkable. I used to talk to Putin about it. It was the apple of his eyes. And I said, "Don't ever do it. Don't ever do it."'

[10] I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this quote.

issue and on the connected questions of America's global leadership, the presidential primaries unearthed the differences between the traditional wing of the party, represented by Haley, Pence, and Chris Christie, and those who are more aligned with the 'MAGA' base, like Vivek Ramaswamy, DeSantis, and Trump himself. When Ukraine came up in the debates, the traditionalists evoked America's historical obligations to global leadership, for instance, with the reference to the 'arsenal of democracy' in the spirit of the 'Reagan Doctrine' (by Pence), or by invoking 'moral clarity' (Rev.com, 2023a). In the second debate, Haley even attacked DeSantis for previously characterizing the war as a 'territorial dispute'; nevertheless, DeSantis rather highlighted his intention to 'end the war,' while Ramaswamy repeated more openly anti-Ukraine talking points such as 'just because Putin is an evil dictator does not mean that Ukraine is good' (Rev.com, 2023b). Although Haley won praise for her debate performances, the responses she gave in this example were more remote from the preferences of a base that increasingly viewed the support of Ukraine with suspicion and rather wanted an 'America First' policy to protect threatened identities.

This was, of course, most evidently outlined in Trump's speeches, who contrasted his approach with Biden's, who 'puts China first,' 'puts Asia first,' 'puts Ukraine first,' 'puts illegal aliens first' (Trump, 2023b). By comparing Ukraine to other external threats to U.S. identity, such as the perceived border crisis, he has moved toward more particularistic solutions in international policy, successfully tapping into discontent over 'globalism' among those experiencing internal domestic ontological insecurities. Moreover, Trump (2023c) has repeatedly connected the Ukraine war to a perceived decline of the United States, being taken advantage of and humiliated globally under Biden's leadership, which can only be reversed through his more inward-looking policies. The simultaneous references to shame (under 'globalist' leadership) and pride (in the past and under a potential future 'MAGA' direction) can reflect what Hagström understood as 'great power narcissism,' and what can be seen as the recognition of domestic grievances earlier mentioned here.

From this, it is unsurprising that during the campaign Trump did not pay too much attention to how the conflict could actually be resolved; after all, for him, it was more of a symbol of America's humiliation and its wasting of resources, which *Others* who are more closely affected – Europeans, NATO allies – should have mobilized. He also maintained that he could settle the conflict in one day – or even before taking office (Trump, 2023a) – simply because 'he knows' Putin and Zelensky; however, this did not indicate a resolution based on principles such as defense of democracy or recognition of territorial integrity. In this language, being the 'peacemaker' becomes the primary stated aim (Trump, 2023a) – even when such 'talking peace favors the aggressor,' which strikingly resembles the rhetoric used by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán about the Ukraine conflict (Peragovics, 2024), a politician Trump frequently praises in connection with his attitude to the war, and whom he also evoked in the debate against Harris (Rev.com, 2024).

Of course, by hindsight, we know that Trump did not create peace either in twenty-four hours or even during the first few months of his presidency; still, his oscillating approach to the conflict deviated from the policies of the previous administration. Although at some points he tried to put pressure on Putin as well, many times he blamed Ukraine or personally Zelensky for the conflict, in line with the expectations of the 'MAGA' base. Most prominently, at the disastrous meeting with Zelensky in the White House in February 2025, some concerns related to ontological insecurity surfaced, for

instance, when Vice President Vance insisted that Zelensky should thank Trump (The Guardian, 2025). Consequently, the war in Ukraine has also become part of the global struggle over the meanings of major issues in international politics between liberals and forces of transnational populism.

6 Findings and conclusion: Who polarizes whom?

The aim of the research was to demonstrate how a feedback loop can develop in the polarized understanding of certain identity-laden foreign-policy issues between public opinion and elite discourse due to mutually reinforcing ontological insecurities. In this way, the analysis served as a plausibility test for the hypothesis about how issues discussed in such terms can especially polarize both decision-makers and the general public by projecting internal grievances into the international sphere. Indeed, the Congressional delay of the adoption of new aid packages to Ukraine visibly shows that diverging identity constructions do not merely affect foreign-policy rhetoric, but can ultimately also constrain outcomes in policy-making. Furthermore, while it was not the intention here to draw definitive conclusions on the 'who polarizes whom' question between public opinion and the elites, a brief timeline of the findings can still reveal some of the mechanisms through which the domestic consensus over Ukraine has vanished.

First, even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there were some observable pre-existing identity-related divisions over the general contours of American foreign policy: going back to the Tea Party movement, we could identify a demand for a more sceptical and inward-oriented, less universalist direction, which was further substantiated in Trump's 'America First' slogan. Specifically, probably due to the domestically polarized views of the interference in the 2016 elections, Russia itself was a divisive issue, but overall there was less public awareness about the topic of Ukraine. Once the invasion began in February 2022, elites temporarily consolidated behind a common position, and the rising awareness – in line with the theory behind Zaller's mainstream effect – translated into a near-consensus among the public. However, there were already signs of potential weaknesses in this consensus: besides the pre-existing divisions over Russia, it was also notable that some 'MAGA' influencers like the political activist Charlie Kirk emphasized that the 'U.S. southern border matters a lot more than the Ukrainian border' in the very morning following the invasion (Hounshell & Askarinam, 2022). Moreover, while Trump and leading Republican politicians originally condemned the invasion, the relative absence of remarks later could further destabilize the consensus, especially as President Biden embraced a value- and identity-laden discourse in the meantime. Pew Research surveys in September 2022 and January 2023 found a growing gap between Republican and Democratic identifiers, and this gap was, arguably, further deepened by mid-2023, partly due to the inputs coming from 'MAGA' influencers, but increasingly also because of some remarks by Trump and DeSantis, as the responses to Tucker Carlson's questionnaire in March exemplify. The Chicago Council Survey, taken in September 2023, shows a rapidly growing dissensus compared to the previous year's results, especially because of the growing scepticism of 'Trump' Republicans, and the presidential primary debates around the same time also underscore the divide between the 'MAGA' movement and the traditional wing of the Republican Party. Trump himself could afford to skip these debates, but by late 2023, his own 'America First' rhetoric had also intensi-

fied, and a growing number of Congressional Republicans deserted their support of Ukraine.

Then, a plausible conclusion to draw is that an already *generally* sceptical part of the public received cues about these *specific* policies from certain opinion-leaders, and ultimately, from presidential candidates; however, the absence of forceful support for Ukraine itself could also weaken the consensus. In the meantime, Trump and DeSantis could also perceive that in order to fulfill expectations from their supporters, they have to approach the issue from an 'America First' angle, especially while traditional Republicans and Democrats justify the aid in identity-driven terms. At this point, higher awareness meant higher divergence, confirming Zaller's polarization thesis, while the tracing of these developments has shed light on how an originally seemingly non-partisan issue gradually turned into something more partisan. Therefore, the theoretical contribution here is more than simply to confirm the relevance of Zaller's two models, but also to show how one may turn into the other. The results do not necessarily contradict the findings of Guisinger and Saunders (2017) either: while originally baseline public opinion was indeed depolarized, underlying deeper tensions already existed, whereas the weaker initial pro-Ukraine signals by Trump and other Republicans were quickly overridden by more forceful identity-related divisions. Moreover, by connecting 'internalist' and 'externalist' components of ontological security, the paper showed how identity issues below the state-level can impact outcomes in international politics.

Whereas his model primarily stresses the top-down nature of preference formation, Zaller (1994, pp. 202–204) himself notes that it remains somewhat unclear to what extent 'elites really lead' rather than, for instance, follow public opinion by calculating possible expectations. Further research is certainly needed to decide who drives whose polarization, but the case of the U.S. divide over Ukraine suggests that for issues that touch upon crucial aspects of identities, it is incredibly difficult to depolarize debates even if temporary consensus is found. With Trump's return to the White House and following the disastrous meeting with Zelensky, the future of aid provision to Ukraine has become highly uncertain (and it was completely halted at some point), though other examples, such as his turnaround in the Iran case, suggest that the 'America First' expectations may constrain, but do not fully determine his political room for maneuver.

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SUMIT KUMAR*

Decolonizing Panchayats in India: Exploring Gandhian decentralization as a mechanism for grassroots involvement

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Abstract

This paper explores why, despite having a long tradition of grassroots-level institutions like Panchayats, Indian democracy remains centralized. Second, this paper explores the possibilities associated with the application of a Gandhian model of decentralization and whether it could decolonize Panchayats and regenerate participative mechanisms rooted in Indian society. Postcolonial theory, especially Dipesh Chakrabarty's concept of the heterogeneity of the historical timelines of colonial societies and Bourdieu's concepts of field, 'practice', and habitus, is used to explain the colonization of Panchayats. Colonization is a process that is different from mere conquest, and one of the essential elements of this process is the destitution of indigenous institutions. Colonization transplanted modern fields of production into colonized Indian society, and native agents in these new fields lost agency because they were unfamiliar with the 'practice' in these fields. When Panchayats were revived in post-independence India, the structural corruptions of the colonial political, juridical, and bureaucratic fields were inherited by these new Panchayats. Gandhi suggested a solidarity-based conciliatory framework with a very limited state, where the individual is at the center, and power radiates outward.

Keywords: *decolonization, Panchayat, participation, decentralized democracy, Gandhian philosophy*

1 Introduction

Of all the ideas that came to the fore during the time of Enlightenment in Europe, none has had a more telling impact on the lives of the people across the globe than democracy. Even in the regions where oppressive dictatorial regimes or despotic kingdoms exist, the ideals of democracy still have a large impact on the power struggles and exercise of authority within state infrastructure. Modern[1] democracy as it is, is riddled with paradoxes of its own; however, colonial democracy in India is not only riddled with democratic paradoxes like Rousseau's paradox of politics and the paradox of democratic legitimacy (Kumar, 2026b), but it is also a structurally corrupted version of modern democracy itself. Two centuries of colonization of India had the effect of destituting indigenous institutions, including the *Panchayats*, which had the potential to evolve into direct democracies.

[1] It is important to mention here that coloniality and modernity are two sides of the same coin, and, according to Mignolo (2009), both go hand in hand. The process of colonization was also a process of modernization, and the only reason coloniality is challenged in late modern times is that modernity itself is also challenged in the postmodern episteme.

As far as modern democracies go, India is the largest of them all; it has a population which is more than the entire population of Europe, North America and Australia combined, a large proportion of which still lives below the poverty line. It has almost a billion registered voters and more than two thousand political parties; twenty-two different languages are recognized by its constitution; there are multiple religions, and it is more culturally diverse than any other region of the world, and yet it has consistently remained a democracy (Guha, 2017). One of the reasons behind this is the social embeddedness of democracy in India. The *Panchayat* is an indigenous institution that has not only existed in India for more than three thousand years but was also the most influential institution of governance until British colonial rule destroyed it (Mathew, 1995).

Panchayats are the oldest form of local self-government, having existed on the Indian subcontinent for almost three millennia. However, the moment I refer to this as an institution, or a direct democracy, a form of government, I destitute it at an epistemic level. Bhabha (1984) calls this the *mimicry* of the colonizer; as a native (subaltern), I am incapable of speaking (Spivak, 1996), and I can only be spoken for or spoken of. I can only *mimic* the colonizer because every word that comes out of my mouth is in the language of the colonizer, and I am incapable of describing *Panchayats* using any category other than the categories of modern science, namely: direct democracy, self-government and institution. *Panchayats,* in fact, could have been anything, but we, or indeed any colonized native, cannot imagine, think, or sense them using any other categories than the categories of the colonizer. This is how destitution is realized at an epistemic level. The original Sanskrit word literally means an assembly of five, and in the past, *Panchayats* consisted of respected and wise elders of the village community, either nominated, chosen, or drawn through lots. Their main function was to settle disputes between individuals and neighboring villages (Mathew, 1995).

Regarding the decolonization of *Panchayats*, it is not necessary to create a new epistemology or construct new indigenous categories to explain it. In fact, even if we did that, (1) it is highly unlikely that it would be accepted in the West, because of the existing geopolitical hierarchies of knowledge production (Mignolo, 2009); and, (2) as Spivak (1996) points out, if the subaltern acquires speech, they will disappear, which means that the subaltern will no longer remain subaltern, but their disappearance also means that the colonizer would become incapable of understanding the speech of the native. Therefore, Mignolo (2009) contends that decolonization can be achieved at an epistemic level only, and it does not require the creation of a new epistemology to challenge modern epistemology, but rather a kind of civil disobedience at the epistemic level that exposes the hidden geopolitical hierarchies of knowledge production. Decolonization does not require the construction of new categories, for in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 2013), that would only create new hierarchies; instead, it merely entails the critical exposure of the existing categorization of *Panchayats* as an institution of self-governance or direct democracy. The fact is that it will always remain an institution of self-governance or direct democracy, because when William Bentinck revived it, he was not really reviving the *Panchayats* of ancient times; rather, he was transplanting the British political field into colonial India (Singh, 2006). Exposing this destitution of the institution of *Panchayats* in the British political field is the purpose of decolonization, and to achieve this at the epistemic level, I use Gandhi's criticism of modern politics.

Gandhi suggested *Panchayats* as the basis of the Indian political system; his

vision has been collectively termed '*Gram Swaraj*' (Village Republics or Village Self-Government). Gandhi (2017) believed that the concentration of economic and political power restricts participation. He viewed *Panchayats* as institutions of both parallel politics and economic autonomy, and as the basic unit of participatory democracy. His view of India was that of a federation of small village republics (Gandhi & Prabhu, 1959).

In 1793, with the enactment of the 'Permanent Settlement', the British comprehensively restructured village society in India. The *Panchayats* were sidelined, and a kind of feudal structure was established which, on the one hand, facilitated the exploitation of India's vast natural resources, and on the other, took the administration of the villages out of the hands of the *Panchayats* and vested it in the hands of landlords. For example, even before the colonization of Bengal began, in Madras (one of the British trading ports in India) they had already established what was called the *Choultry Court* (or the 'black court') to adjudicate disputes among natives (Singh, 2006). These courts were headed by a person called an *adigar*, which usually referred to the head of the *Panchayat* in the Tamil language. However, the structure of these *Panchayats* was reduced to something similar to a court of chancery in England, and the procedure changed from conciliatory to adjudicative. The *adigar* was now appointed rather than chosen by the villagers and, in most cases, became the landlord after the enactment of the Permanent Settlement. This meant that the *Panchayats* lost their transient and participatory character and became bureaucratic organizations established by law. Guha (1982, p. 6) says, '*Physiocratic thought, the precursor of Political Economy, was an implacable critique of feudalism in its native habitat and proved to be a real force in undermining the* ancien régime*. Ironically, however, while being grafted to India by the most advanced capitalist power of that age, it became instrumental in building a neo-feudal organisation of landed property and in the absorption and reproduction of pre-capitalist elements in a colonial regime.*' Two centuries later, in 1993, *Panchayats* were re-established as the unit of local governance in the villages of India through the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India. The break in organizational continuity, and the colonial destitution of Panchayats restructured around representation rather than participation, made them another instrument of power concentrated in the hands of a few. Gandhi believed that democracy becomes impossible unless power is shared by all, and Panchayats ideally should create a form of parallel politics in which people's power is institutionalized to counter the centralizing and alienating forces of the modern state (Sharma, 1987).

As explained earlier, decolonization can only be achieved at an epistemic level, and it does not require a new epistemology to be created; rather, it requires epistemic disobedience, which can be achieved through border thinking, sensing, and feeling (Mignolo, 2009). What this requires is critical thinking about the field boundaries of the subject matters of modernity like history, anthropology, linguistics, politics, economy, and sociology. These subjects are the ones that construct the discourse that dehumanizes the 'native' and destitute their indigenous institutions, and it is the boundaries of these subjects of modernity that need to be exposed for decolonization to be achieved. In this essay, I attempt to deconstruct the English political field that was transplanted to India through colonization and resulted (among other things) in the destitution of *Panchayats*.

2 Colonizing deficit

The main focus of post-colonial theories is to criticize dominant modern discourses on colonialism[2] and how colonization was responsible for the destitution of indigenous socio-cultural institutions. The pre-colonial political geography of India can be easily compared to that of Europe; it was constituted by small kingdoms which were interspersed with large empires at certain times during its past. However, the political character of these kingdoms and empires in the period preceding colonization was very different from that of the European monarchies. The Kings in India were not concerned with the day-to-day functioning of the kingdom, maintaining law and order, or ensuring justice like in Europe. Instead, they only concerned themselves with collecting taxes and expanding their kingdoms to collect more and more revenue. Before the arrival of the British, one of the major reasons for the decline and disintegration of the Mughal Empire in India was its excessive dependence on high taxes. Most of this was spent on suppressing revolts, which were a direct consequence of the excessive tax burden (Leonard, 1979).

Pre-colonial India did not have a political system like that of Europe, or, as Bourdieu (2004) would have rightly pointed out, a bureaucratic field had not developed in India, as in the case of French society. It was highly unlikely that a bureaucratic or juridical field like the one that developed in Europe would ever have developed in Indian society because, as pointed out earlier, the Kings of India were not interested in the micromanagement of their subjects. For example (even if we accept the colonial version of Indian history), during ancient times, the Nanda dynasty in Pataliputra (the ancient capital of India) was replaced by Chandragupta Maurya, who belonged to the lowest of the castes (Shudra). There was no link to any bloodline, and in fact, when the Mauryans were replaced, it was a Brahmin (the highest of the castes) who replaced them. Neither of these dynasties belonged to the warrior caste of Kshatriyas, who were apparently by profession the ruling caste in India (Majumdar, 2016). The political field in pre-colonial India was therefore quite differentiated, both geographically as well as on the basis of caste (a solidarity-based division of labor; Durkheim, 2023). It was constituted by the institution of *Panchayats,* and the scope of its operation was quite limited to individual villages or small collections of villages where the laws, rules, and regulations were not codified or written down (not even in the form of judicial precedents) in the same way as in Europe, and procedures were not adjudicative in character; rather, they were consultative (Menon, 2019).

Post-colonial theory is a sister branch of postmodernism, and for some critics of postmodernism the only possible alternative that post-colonialism has to offer is anarchy (Atkinson, 2002). This may be true within a Eurocentric epistemology, which Chakrabarty (2008) refers to as 'provincial' in relation to the understanding of the social world. Anarchy itself is a Eurocentric construct, and categorizing pre-colonial society as anarchic, or anything else that is a European construct, leads to the destitution of indigenous institutions. Those institutions should be placed in their own categories. However, as Mignolo (2009) says, we can take an epistemically disobedient route towards decoloniality. This does not mean creating a whole new epistemic tradition in itself; it simply means setting aside the knowledge produced by the colonizer for the natives and applying scientific rigor to indigenous forms of knowledge production. What Mignolo (2009) describes is nothing new; this is exactly what post-modern sci-

[2] Albeit impossible; at least in theory, they are not intended to construct any other dominating discourse.

entists do. What they do not do, and where he differentiates himself from the rest is apply native knowledge to criticize Eurocentric knowledge production. Epistemic violence sits at the core of postcolonial critical theory, and to that extent it seems to be perfectly able to explain the individual as well as the institutional destitutions of colonialism (Spivak, 1996). However, it seems impossible to decolonize the minds of individuals as well as restitute indigenous institutions through any kind of epistemically violent route. The idea that *Panchayats* are an institution of self-governance, a direct democratic institution, is ingrained in the psyche of the colonized native and reproduced through the colonized education system. Native minds have been permanently conditioned, set on a modernizing path; decolonizing them violently would require the 'revival' of pre-colonial institutions, which would lead to the further exploitation of colonized peoples. This is not to say that pre-colonial institutions were exploitative by themselves; however, those institutions belong to a different time, and what may not have been exploitative two or three centuries ago could definitely be considered exploitative in contemporary times.[3]

Gandhi was very critical (not scientifically) of modernity and its by-products like capitalism, socialism, and even modern democracy; however, he was not critical of the scientific attitude that developed during modern times with the Enlightenment in Western Europe (Gandhi, 1997). Since Gandhi had no training in Western epistemological traditions, his writings do not follow the same patterns as those of Hegel, Hobbes, Locke, or Descartes; they are more like the preachings of an enlightened holy man from India.[4] Gandhi does not talk about postcolonialism (as a subject matter of science, it developed in the 1980s and 1990s) or present any systematic critique of colonial democracy; he died before the colonial version of democracy was established in India in 1950. However, we can apply his thought to even those concepts that have been developed after his death, provided we can apply the three basic themes of his philosophy; *Satya* (Truth), *Ahimsa* (Non-violence), and *Sarvodaya* (Universal Empowerment) to them (Parekh, 2001). The influence the state (if we can even consider it a state) had on the individual lives of its peoples was far less in pre-colonial India than in Europe at the same time. Therefore, the ideas of individual freedoms, liberty, and universal human rights had little meaning in pre-colonial India because the state was not involved in the disciplining of the lives of its peoples, nor was it involved much in punishing deviance (Foucault, 2012). Much Gandhian thought is sourced from the social lives of Indian peoples of the pre-colonial 'time' ('time' that could yet be felt in the villages of India[5]) and hence, the difference in his conceptions of rights and equality compared to modern definitions. His philosophy is deeply influenced by various Indian philosophies (religious and atheistic), but it is also very rationally (instrumentally) critical of these philosophies. In this sense, it is probably the most prominent non-Western philosophy that is available to us to apply critically to modern colonial ideas and institutions in the Indian context. Some Western scholars believe that Gandhi was a post-modernist because he criticized modernity (Rudolph &

[3] For example, witch-burning was normal in pre-modern times; it is not in modern times.

[4] Most of his writings are in the form of a dialogue between two or more people, similar to that of the ancient Indian texts like the Bhagavad Gita. The entire works of Gandhi can be accessed free of charge at https://www.mkgandhi.org/

[5] In order to understand the concept of 'time' in this context, it is recommended to read Ranajit Guha's 'A Colonial City and its time(s)', where he differentiates between festive time and official time, and how the distinction in these times affects the social practices of the people of Calcutta during the start of the colonial regime in India (Guha, 2008).

Rudolph, 2010), while others believe that he was a traditionalist (Friedman, 2008); however, it seems like he was none of the above, but rather just a *native* who was able to think beyond the accepted forms of colonial knowledge production during colonial times (Rudolph & Rudolph, 2010). According to Gandhi (1997), modern democracy (the Westminster model) established in India after independence was rooted in political competition and therefore inherently violent. According to him, periodic elections and the election of representatives made modern English society political, and thus divided into members of political parties. This form of political division was paradoxical to the nature of democracy, as the latter was claimed to be. This political competition meant power was concentrated in Parliament, which almost always represented only an electoral minority, leaving the rest of the citizens feeling they had lost representation. This made the political process inherently violent, according to him, as citizens were not directly involved in the decision-making process and therefore always felt cheated through representation. He therefore preferred the direct, conciliatory process of the *Panchayats* to the English model of democracy. Gandhi and Prabhu (1959) favored the decentralization of state power and advocated a democratic model based on village republics. He said, '*Panchayat… represents the system* […] *by which the innumerable village republics of India were governed. But the British Government, by its ruthlessly thorough method of revenue collection, almost destroyed these ancient republics, which could not stand the shock of this revenue collection.*' (Gandhi & Prabhu, 1959, p. 6) This does not mean that Gandhi's ideas were not *mimetic,* as claimed by post-colonial scholars like Bhabha and Chakrabarty; the mere fact that, while criticizing some of the archaic decisions of the *Panchayats,* he referred to them as illegal meant that he was also using the same colonized categories to destitute an indigenous institution (Gandhi & Prabhu, 1959). However, despite *mimicry,* Gandhi was still able to critically analyze the paradoxical character of European democracies within the same Eurocentric frameworks.

On the one hand, Gandhi attempted to understand the nature of European society and how it differed from Indian society; on the other, mimetic Indian scholars merely apply findings from Eurocentric societies to study and understand colonial societies. This is what Said (2014), Guha (1997), Spivak (1996), and Mignolo (2009) term 'epistemic violence.' When Foucault (1982) describes the historical development of French society, he elucidates a certain type of power relationship that determines the character of that society. However, if he were to apply the same epistemological rules to the historical development of Indian society, the results would not be the same. Epistemic violence does not just end at the stage of studying or describing colonial societies; it then goes on to colonize the minds of natives by conditioning them to accept the colonized version of their own histories. In other words, the kind of Foucauldian biopolitical power that develops in European societies is then superimposed upon the colonized societies, completely disrupting their natural development. It is impossible to claim with any level of certainty whether Indian society would have developed into a more exploitative society or a less exploitative society than it is today had its natural course not been disrupted through colonization. Colonization without any doubt had the effect of creating new exploitative mechanisms which to this day continue to be the cause of deep-rooted challenges in Indian society (Tharoor, 2018).

From Figure 1, it becomes clear that Indian society followed a certain path that it could not sustain because it was colonized and therefore, instead of arriving at the destination it should have, it arrived at a different place, creating what I call a colonizing deficit.

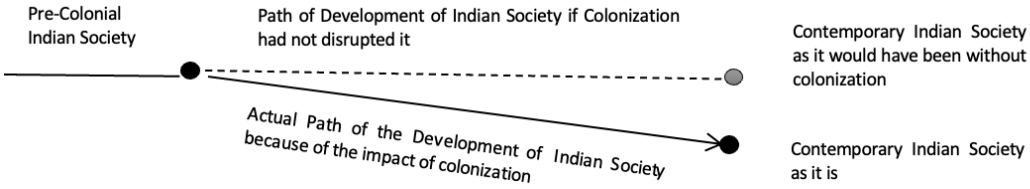

Figure 1 Colonizing Deficit.

The figure explains how colonization took India on a modernizing path. The presumption that pre-colonial India was pre-modern is challenged by post-colonial theory because it results in the categorization of India as uncivilized and the subsequent destitution of Indian forms of knowledge. Source: Author's own elaboration.

However, there are two very important questions that must be considered in this context: (i) would Indian society be completely free of the modernizing influences of Europe had it not been colonized, and (ii) would it be a better society without these modernizing influences? Decolonization, according to the current state of post-colonial theory, would entail what Fanon (2007) calls 'reactionary violence of the natives,' leading to the destruction of colonial institutions. However, if colonial institutions are destroyed, how do we know whether we arrive at a decolonized state of society or a pre-colonial state? This is impossible to determine, and neither would it serve the purpose of decolonization through epistemic disobedience. As noted earlier, epistemic disobedience requires critical thinking about the borders of colonial fields of production (Mignolo, 2009). In this case, what we can do is understand the colonizing deficit by applying Bourdieu's post-structuralist field theory to deconstruct the colonial political field in India.

3 The colonized political field

Bourdieu's description of modernity follows the same mainstream sociological approach of increasing differentiation within the social field. The emergence of the political field during modern times, according to Bourdieu, is a natural consequence of this process of differentiation. For example, the house of the monarch (*maison du roi*) differentiates into the political field, bureaucratic field, and the juridical field, among others (Bourdieu, 2004). Bourdieu's approach to these fields of forces gives us an opportunity to understand the interactions of these social forces and how they influence social behavior. He develops three main ideas: 'practice', *habitus,* and symbolic capital in order to explain the workings of these social fields. The clearly identified rules, or 'practice' in a modern political field could include free and fair elections, campaigning and garnering support to increase the membership of political parties, or implementing the political ideology that has majority support in the legislature (Wacquant, 2004). *Habitus,* on the other hand, is when an agent strategically manipulates the 'rules of the game' and potentially transforms the field. Politicians who make behind-the-scenes deals with other politicians or spend their family fortune to improve their chances of electoral victory are examples of how agents within the modern political field introduce structural corruption into the field itself (Shusterman, 1999).

The modern political field is not just a field of forces; it is also a field of struggles. This is where Bourdieu's conception of symbolic capital comes in handy to explain

these struggles within the field (Jenkins, 2002). In the Marxist conceptualization of capital, it is an essential ingredient in the production and reproduction of capital itself (Marx, 2019). Bourdieu calls this kind of capital 'economic' or 'material' capital. He expands the concept of capital itself to include other forms of capital that can be used not in material production but instead in the production and reproduction of symbolic capital. In the political field, which is also a field of forces and a field of struggle, there is a perpetual struggle that is going on amongst agents; this struggle is determined by access to political capital. Those agents who have access to a sufficient amount of political capital gain a position of dominance within this field, while those who do not have sufficient access to this form of capital are relegated to the dominated part of the field (Wacquant, 2004).[6]

This form of symbolic capital (political capital) is based on the idea of representative power or delegation. Agents (those who lack sufficient political capital) within the field either delegate their symbolic power (political power) to a representative, while those who hold political capital acquire symbolic power through the representation of their constituents. This form of representative power is not only acquired through voluntary mechanisms, but also through *dispossession* and *usurpation* (Wacquant, 2004). The political field, like any other social field, functions in such a way that the production and reproduction of symbolic capital is always concentrated at the dominant end of the field. The political field is a field of struggle, and the struggle is for access to political capital. What would happen to an agent who may or may not have access to some political capital, but refuses to partake in this struggle? Is it even possible for agents to refuse to partake in these struggles? Can the political field exist in the absence of representation and delegation? If this is the character of the modern political field, which differentiates itself from the house of the monarch, what could have been the character of a hypothetical field that had differentiated from something which did not resemble the house of the monarch?

In pre-modern Europe, the character of the house of the monarch was determined by access to what Bourdieu (2004) calls 'dynastic capital.' This is a form of symbolic capital, but one that could not be produced or reproduced publicly; it was privately owned and held by the monarch. The only way it could be reproduced was either through heredity or through the largesse of the king (Bourdieu, 2004). In pre-colonial India, however, the house of the monarch did not exist. Indian kingdoms did not have the same character as European kingdoms. Since it was not a feudal society, people in India did not have the same sense of fealty towards their kings. Dynastic capital, even if it did exist in India, did not have the same value as it had in pre-modern Europe. This, however, does not preclude the existence of other forms of symbolic capitals in pre-colonial India. One of the symbolic capitals that could have been produced and reproduced hereditarily in India was caste capital. Caste in pre-colonial India was a form of Durkheimian social solidarity-based division of labor (Durkheim, 2023). Since it was a form of division of labor, caste capital was not as concentrated as 'dynastic capital' (Bourdieu & Farage, 1994); there was already a certain level of differentiation, and some differentiated fields had already started to emerge.[7] As pointed out earlier,

[6] For clarification, this is a simplified explanation of the production and reproduction of capital in any field. For the purpose of this research, it is not important how it is produced or acquired; however, what is important is that the production and acquisition of capital determine the relative position of dominance within the field.

[7] Something that could resemble a religious field was dominated by the Brahmin caste, while something that could resemble the commercial field was dominated by the Vaishya caste. These differentiations in the social fields could be the topic of another paper.

according to Gandhi and Prabhu (1959) it was the documentation of the Indian condition for the purposes of revenue collection that resulted in the destitution of *Panchayats* but this can also be seen in the argument that Bourdieu and Farage (1994) make about the concentration of the various forms of symbolic capital into what is called 'statist capital' which develops along with the meta-field of power and leads to the genesis of state. The problem with India was that it was not Europe, and the concentration of the various forms of symbolic capital in Europe was a natural process of social development from the pre-modern to the modern, whereas in the case of India it was an outside process of the transplantation of modernity that entrenched the social structures through documentation and absolutely restricted social mobility. Access to caste capital could not have been limited absolutely to heredity because it was a form of division of labor, and the division of labor requires specialized forms of knowledge and skill. This means that even if an agent acquired some form of symbolic capital (any differentiated form of caste capital) due to birth, they could not gain full agency within that field without the acquisition of the skill and knowledge of that field. Access to these specialized forms of knowledge and skills was restricted through birth; if these specialized skills and knowledge could not be acquired by an agent, the agent could lose its agency in the field. This dependence on specialized forms of knowledge also means that there could not have been a single form of caste capital.

There were two major differences in the character of these fields in comparison to the fields that emerged in modern Europe. 1) These fields were hardly fields of struggle; they were fields of forces, but they were not fields of struggle. And 2) the differentiation that was happening in India was not the same as in Europe. In Europe, the differentiation of the house of the monarch culminated in the modern state (Bourdieu, 2004). First, dynastic capital disintegrated into various forms of symbolic capital, like bureaucratic capital, juridical capital, and political capital, and then these became concentrated in the hands of a few, leading to the homology of these fields and the construction of the meta-field of power and simultaneously what may be called statist capital. Since the house of the monarch did not exist in India in the same way it did in Europe, its differentiation could not produce the same type of state that exists in Europe. In modern fields, the struggle is to acquire more and more symbolic power through representation or delegation, which in turn gives the agent access to symbolic capital to achieve a dominant position in the field (Wacquant, 2004). Similar or identical institutional structures to those in Europe at the time may or may not have existed in pre-colonial India, but indigenous institutional structures developed over centuries. Furthermore, India was a more culturally diverse society than Europe of that time, not just in terms of geography or religious practices, but also in terms of racial diversity. Despite all this diversity, the institutional structures that we have been able to identify were mostly homogeneous in character, with local specificities throughout the Indian subcontinent. One such institution that transcended cultural, religious, racial, and geographical diversity in pre-colonial India was the *Panchayat*. This institution has existed throughout Indian history and across India's geography without interruption, even during colonial times (Muhlberger & Paine, 1993).

The existence of this institution is clearly the result of the interaction of social forces in India; however, it is not a field of struggle for two reasons. Its functioning is not determined by representation or delegation of symbolic power and, even more importantly, it is not permanent in character. It only appears when its need arises. Even if we can consider it a field, the agents within this field of forces are not involved in a

struggle but only in conciliation (Mahendran, 2012). It needs to be clarified that Bourdieusian fields are structured by the individual *habitus,* and the structuring structures of the *habitus* are what determines the character of the symbolic capitals that develop with the corresponding fields; therefore, these structured and structuring structures of fields, capital and *habitus* all have a cultural context and the native Indian fields may or may not have the same or similar structures as those of European fields (Bourdieu & Farage, 1994). Access to certain forms of symbolic capital based on skill, knowledge, experience, and some form of social capital acquired through heredity is required to obtain a position of dominance within this transient field; however, like the field itself, this position of dominance is not permanent either. Indian society institutionally avoids situations of conflict (Luhmann, 1988) and, in order to do this, the *Panchayats* function on the basis of a conciliatory framework where a certain form of symbolic capital that determines the structure of the transient *Panchayat* is produced and reproduced until a condition of balance is achieved amongst the agents within the field. If a situation of balance is not arrived at, conflict arises, and then the character of the field changes to one where those agents who are responsible for the existence of conflict are deprived of all agency and excommunicated from the field (Hayden, 1983). The deprivation of agency in this situation is not dependent on any idea of justice itself, but rather on the relative positions of dominance of the various agents in conflict within this field. However, this relative position of dominance within the field can only be maintained if justice is achieved. If justice is not achieved, the transient structure of the field of the *Panchayat* itself relieves the dominant agents of their position of dominance. Once either of these situations of balance or excommunication is achieved, the *Panchayat* ceases to exist until such time that it is needed again.[8] The fact that in pre-colonial India *Panchayats* were not a permanent institution (Kumar, 2022) clearly points towards the possibility that the differentiation in the social fields that was under process in pre-colonial Indian times could have resulted in a *transient state* or a *contingent state* or a *situational state* and definitely not a modern state such as that which developed in Europe (Bourdieu, 2004; Bourdieu & Farage, 1994).

At the time of India's colonization, France was undergoing revolutionary change, American colonies were fighting for independence, and Charles I had been executed; Europe was in transition. In Bourdieu (2004)'s terms, the house of the king was differentiating into the modern fields of politics, bureaucracy, and law; however, these fields had not completely differentiated, and what was extended to colonial India through the extension of the empire was partly the house of the king and partly these partially differentiated modern fields. When Guha (1982) says that the colonization of India led to the 'production and reproduction of pre-capitalist elements' in Indian society, what this really means is that the social fields of pre-colonial India fused together into what would have been the house of the king and led to the deindustrialization and feudalization of Indian society. One reason for a state, according to Bourdieu (2004), is the king's fear of his brothers, which forces him to distribute dynastic capital outside of the house in order to keep his brothers under control. This dynastic capital changes its symbolic character and leads to the disintegration of the house, giving birth to new fields. The same thing happened in India; the British could not rule India without the cooperation of at least some Indians, so they created a new land-owning

[8] Some of the best examples of this kind of conciliatory mechanism can be traced in the celebrated Hindi novel Godaan (the gift of a cow), written by the greatest of Hindi litterateurs, Munshi Premchand. It is considered the most accurate description of Indian society during the pre-colonial/colonial period (Premchand, 2020).

class and passed on some of their dynastic capital to this new class to ensure their fealty to the king (Guha, 1997). The *maison du roi* in England was already differentiating, and those in India who acquired a portion of the dynastic capital were able to progressively convert it into other forms of symbolic capital, including political capital. It was this land-owning class that created the first political organizations in India (Chandra et al., 2016).

However, more important was the impact that this had on the indigenous fields. For example, in pre-colonial India, land was not owned; neither the *Jagirdari* system introduced in northern India by the Muslim rulers before colonization nor the *Tamrapatra* of the Cholas in the south granted ownership rights over land like those of the noblemen in Europe. These instruments were merely used to define tax-collection rights on behalf of the king, and it would be a *mimetic* misinterpretation to assume the existence of land rights in India. Mukhia (1981) claims that the peasants in Europe were totally dependent on their landlords, whereas in pre-colonial India, the farmers were free and independent producers. And therefore, who cultivated what and how much was communally decided; there was no delegation or representation of symbolic power. With colonization, the colonial power was represented through the landlord (*zamindar*), who decided what could be cultivated, how, and by whom (Prasad, 1928); the rightful place of a *Panchayat* was lost. In pre-colonial India, if there was a dispute regarding the payment of a promissory note or a bill of exchange (Hundi) or a debt, a *Panchayat* would be constituted to balance the field of forces (Singh & Yadav, 2022), while in colonial times the symbolic power was represented through agents of the East India Company and later through the colonial courts that applied English common law to India (Singh, 2006).

Indigenous fields started to disappear, and the indigenous agents started to lose agency along with them. Various forms of symbolic capital lost their relevance in the new colonial fields. The new forms of symbolic capital that were introduced were not accessible to the native population: the latter were never in a position to produce and reproduce them. The only access that natives had to these forms of symbolic capital was through the King's largesse or through the conversion of material capital into these new symbolic capitals. In either case, as Bourdieu (2004) points out, structural corruption enters the field. The structure of the Bourdieusian political field is determined either by representation of political power (democratic) or through the usurpation and dispossession of political power (authoritarian), but a paradoxical situation is created through colonization: in England, the field is structured by the representation of political power, but the same field, when extended to India, is structured by usurpation (Wacquant, 2004). However, this structural corruption means that the agents in the colonized field cannot reproduce political capital (1) because they do not have access to this form of symbolic capital and it is an essential ingredient in the production of capital itself, and (2) because the native agents are not aware of the 'practice' in this new transplanted field and therefore do not know the rules of the game. The only option available to them is to convert other forms of capital into political capital. Even those symbolic capitals that structured the transient field of *Panchayats* get converted into political capital in the new field, and destituted the *Panchayats*.

The 'practice' and *habitus* of the natives that developed with the old indigenous fields are out of place in the new colonial political field, one which functions through the representation and delegation of political power, while the new indigenous agents in this field do not know how to represent and delegate. The new field is not just a field

of forces, but also a field of struggles, and it turns disputes into conflicts that can no longer be balanced out but only adjudicated. In Gandhian terms, the colonial political field turned into a violent site of the representation of political power; the modern English political field works through the representation of political power, whereas the colonial political field works through the violent usurpation and dispossession of political power. The only way for indigenous natives to regain agency in such a field is by converting material capital into political capital. Since the colonial political field is not indigenous, the agency that the native Indian acquires in this field is also '*mimetic*,' and the native can only act by *mimicking* the colonizer (Bhabha, 1984). As pointed out earlier, since the indigenous agents are unaware of the 'practice' in the new colonial political field, the only option they are left with is copying the 'practice' of the colonizer. This *mimicry* of colonial 'practice' is the reason for what Fanon (2007) terms the native's desire to humanize, and it is this *mimicry* that puts the native on a modernizing path, destituting his pre-colonial past into the category of pre-modern history.

After India's independence, the new political field *mimicked* the modern democratic political field that had emerged in Western Europe and North America by then. More than three-quarters of the Constitution of India that came into force in 1950 was copied verbatim from the Government of India Act, 1935, passed by the British Parliament (Basu et al., 2015). However, this field is a continuation of the corrupted colonial political field, which does not work through the representation of political power. As pointed out earlier, Bourdieu recognizes the possibility of dispossession and usurpation even in modern democratic political fields; this possibility in a structurally corrupt colonial political field characterized solely by the violent usurpation of political power is even greater (Wacquant, 2004). Another layer of destitution of the indigenous institutions is caused by the fact that even though the native can *mimic* the 'practice' of the colonizer in the *mimetic* political field, the *habitus* of the native has developed in the pre-colonial indigenous fields, and so even *mimetic* struggles in the colonized political field are manipulated by the natives' pre-colonial predispositions, introducing further structural corruption in these fields.

4 Decolonizing the field

Gandhi had what Mignolo (2009) would later describe as an epistemically disobedient approach to understanding his social world. Furthermore, he did not have access to scientific data on traditional or modern society when he criticized modernity. As pointed out earlier, his views were partly influenced by some of the outliers in the modern social world, like Tolstoy or Ruskin, and partly grounded in his typically Hindu religious upbringing; truth, non-violence, and empowerment are the three essential elements of his philosophy (Parekh, 2001). Gandhi equates truth with God and states that seeking truth is the ultimate goal of human existence; however, like God, absolute truth is unreachable, so all anyone can really achieve is relational truth. Seeking truth within oneself purifies one's spirit, and only when one's spirit is pure can one seek truth outside in the social world (Gandhi & Desai, 1928). The method of seeking truth in the social world is *Satyagraha* (which literally translates to 'seeking truth'). The path to truth is always non-violent. Like God, truth may not be sought through violence. In order to seek truth, first of all one should become non-violent from within. Renunciation of the 'fruits of action' is the only purely non-violent method of seeking

God and therefore truth. Finally, the empowerment of all is a direct consequence of *Satyagraha*. This does not mean the 'equality of all' or 'upliftment of all.' *Satyagraha* requires everyone to seek truth within themselves; as a social movement, it is nothing more than a polite request to do so, and when one seeks truth within oneself, it automatically empowers one (Parekh, 2001).

Modern civilization, according to Gandhi, is a degenerate form of civilization, and in fact he refused to accept it as civilization at all. It is rooted in materialism, self-interest, and consumption, the natural consequence of all of which is violence (Gandhi, 1997). In direct opposition to Weber's views, Gandhi (1997) believed that if there must be politicians, they must always be ethical and work in society's interest rather than their own selfish interest.[9] At the same time, he was not unaware of the pitfalls of representation. He happened to equate modern parliament to a prostitute[10] falling into the arms of a new cabinet every few years (Gandhi, 1997). According to Gandhi, the character of representation itself makes politics violent. Representation makes a politician powerful, and the politician's purpose is no longer the welfare of society but retaining that position of power (Parekh, 2001). Gandhi (1997) says that representation gives a monkey the power to negotiate a dispute between cats.[11] Seemingly, it is not in the politician's interest if the dispute is resolved; rather, it is in the politician's interest if it becomes a conflict and some form of violence is introduced. He therefore suggested the revival of the ancient *Panchayats* as the basis of the decentralized state, which are limited in their scope of representative power (Gandhi & Prabhu, 1959).

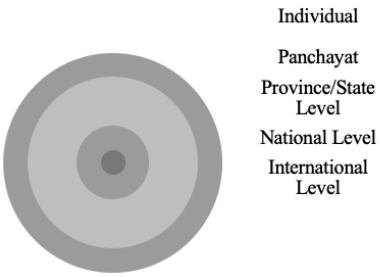

Figure 2 Gandhian Concentric Circles of Governance.

The figure explains how, in Gandhian philosophy, the very imited state is organized in the form of concentric circles designed around the individual, and how power radiates outwards from the individual to the outer co-equal circles of governance. Source: Author's own elaboration.

Panchayats do not function through representation but through direct participation; therefore, their mechanisms are conciliatory rather than adversarial or political. Furthermore, *Panchayats* are transient in character, so they only appear if a dispute arises somewhere (Kumar, 2022). In pre-colonial times, the *Panchayats* did not exist in the absence of the *Gram Sabha*, and if a matter is brought before a *Panchayat*, to this day, it

[9] In some ways, he sees himself as a politician who is ethical and concerned about society rather than himself (Gandhi, 1997).

[10] Gandhi was criticized for this comparison by the then president of the Indian National Congress, Annie Besant; not because it was derogatory to parliament, but because it was considered derogatory to prostitutes (Gandhi, 1997).

[11] This refers to a story from the ancient Panchatantra (moral fables for kids written in Sanskrit around 200 BCE) where a monkey negotiates a dispute over a loaf of bread between two cats and ends up eating the bread.

is seen as a matter of dishonor for the parties to the dispute; it means that there is a claim that at least one of the parties has not performed their duties towards others or society in general. The Gandhian model of governance is a system of concentric circles with the individual at the center and with co-equal circles of governance around the individual denoting the scope and extent of conciliation that may be required in each case of potential dispute. Only when a matter cannot be resolved at the individual level or when a dispute turns into a conflict does a representative outer co-equal circle become involved. As noted earlier, even *Panchayats* are involved only if individuals cannot resolve the matter themselves. The extent and scope of representative mechanisms is limited exclusively to those cases where direct participation is not possible, for example, the international arena, which may not have the same form of direct participatory governance mechanisms (Nadkarni et al., 2017). The delegation of power can only happen from the center towards the circumference and not the other way round. Minimal hierarchy is intended in this case, and only matters that cannot be resolved at the individual level get passed on to the level of *Panchayat*; then only those that cannot be resolved at the level of *Panchayat* get passed on to the next level, and so on.

The colonial destitution of *Panchayats* meant that conciliatory mechanisms were replaced by adjudicative mechanisms (Kumar, 2025). The passing of judgments created winners and losers in disputes and was an inherently violent process, as the loser would never feel satisfied and would always be ready to take retribution for the loss. This, according to Gandhi, creates a 'cycle of violence' which is very difficult to break. The old method of *Panchayats* was non-violent, through which individuals arrived at what Gandhi called 'relational truth,' which all parties to the dispute accepted as just. This method did not create any winners or losers and therefore could not lead to violence (Parekh, 2001). Again, as pointed out earlier, the *Gram Sabha* was an essential part of the old *Panchayats*, which meant that the village participated in the deliberations of the *Panchayat* even after the *Panch* had been named. The job of the *Panch* (as it remains to this day when they are chosen in the old way instead of elections) was to suggest alternative solutions that the parties could accept or reject, rather than to adjudicate.

Since the formation of the Indian republic in 1950, *Panchayats* have gradually been destituted into modern democratic institutions in almost every part of India.[12] Elections are held every five years to elect the members of each village Panchayat; they are now permanent political bodies which perform functions that have been partly devolved upon them from the higher levels of the state. The kind of democracies that exist around the world today are all liberal and procedural in character and are essentially based on political (electoral) competition (Diamond, 1990). A Gandhian state is based on the idea that all humans may not be equal, and it may not be possible to achieve absolute equality. However, it also clearly accepts the idea that there are some areas of law and governance where, no matter what, every human is to be treated equally (this includes the unequal treatment of unequals in order to achieve overall nominal equality). This idea also acknowledges the fact that there are other areas of law and governance where citizens may not choose to be treated equally.[13] The fact

[12] There still remain Panchayats that are not organized and bureaucratically controlled by the state, and there is always the possibility of indigenous Panchayats emerging out of necessity, but essentially the politico-legal establishment of Panchayats as the unit of local governance has resulted in their overall destitution (Kumar, 2022).

[13] Even in the present context, different personal laws (laws relating to inheritance, succession, marriages, divorce

that most citizens in India vote for a different political party at every election and furthermore, that politicians keep changing political parties even more frequently, points towards the apolitical character of most citizens and suggests that it is highly unlikely that political competition is a necessary and essential pre-condition for the existence of democracy in India (Kashyap, 1970; Page, 1994). Gandhi (1997) believed that party politics is inherently violent and cannot therefore be reconciled with democracy. As a matter of fact, in what was published as *His Last Will and Testament*, he suggested the dissolution of the Indian National Congress after India achieved independence because he believed that political parties would only result in the substitution of English exploitative mechanisms with Indian exploitative mechanisms if the state remained a *mimicry* of the English state based on political competition (Prabhu & Rao, 1960).

The original *Panchayats* formed a unique institution, where the entire village community existed as the *Gram Sabha* (village assembly), which named a group of five that formed a *Panchayat* (five-member council), and this council carried out all communal functions, including those comparable to those of an undifferentiated legislature and judiciary, and even bureaucratic tax collection at the village level. One of the reasons why the decisions of *Panchayats* in Indian villages were self-executing is because they were made by the *Panchayats* in consultation with the entire village community, whereas the constitution or law in India is imposed upon people from the top (of the colonial state) and therefore needs machinery to execute (Kumar, 2026a). In contemporary times, when Indians have assimilated/*mimicked* most modern Enlightenment ideas, the sole reason democracy has not just survived but thrived is the existence of a 'living memory' of *Panchayats* (Confino, 1997; Nora, 1989).

For Gandhi (1997), the individual is at the center, and all the other institutions that are needed to constitute the state form co-equal concentric circles around the individual. He describes independent, self-reliant village republics that come together to form a new type of state not based on political competition for power, but on solidarity and respect for fellow humans (Gandhi & Prabhu, 1959). The institution that was supposed to form the basis of governance in these village republics was the *Panchayat*, but the fact remains that modernity has penetrated almost every aspect of Indian social life, and it is no longer possible to separate it from the *Panchayat*. However, this does not preclude small communities from being governed by a *Panchayat*. As a matter of fact, this is already happening in India, with elections being held every five years to elect *Panchayats*. This clearly means the character of *Panchayats* has shifted from transient to permanent and based on representation. This is a top-down structure in which the state devolves authority to govern the *Panchayats*.

Nevertheless, this political competition has resulted in the declining participation of people. In a 2001 study, almost 65 per cent of respondents said they had never attended a *Panchayat* meeting. Only about 20-40 per cent were actively involved in the decision-making process. In spite of the reservation provisions, the involvement of women and backward classes was still recorded to be low (Alsop et al., 2001). Even when women participated, male-dominated village society sabotaged their work, or male family members made decisions on their behalf (Jain, 1996). Some of the deviant and discriminatory social practices that have continued in modern times in India, which are very clearly demonstrated by the actions of *Khap Panchayats* leading to

and the like...) as they apply to different religious communities in India serve as good examples of when citizens choose not to be equals and consciously choose to be governed by different laws. Special laws apply only to certain communities, and regional or local laws may apply to specific regions only (Menon, 2014).

honor killings and excommunications from social life, also indicate the serious limitations of this institution, which needs to be dealt with not just from the politico-legal angle but also from a social reformist perspective (Bharadwaj, 2012).

On the one hand, this means that decolonizing institutions that function through the representation of power does not require replacing them with indigenous institutions; at the same time, it also means that indigenous institutions can be restituted within the frameworks of these modern institutions. Gandhi and Desai (1928) believed that the only truly non-violent method is that of *Satyagraha,* and it works both at the individual level and the communal level. However, it is not easy to practice, requiring a lot of tolerance and self-sacrifice.

Indigenous institutions can only be restituted non-violently at the individual level because any change instituted by the state can only be a violent change; the shift must start at the level of the individual and flow radially outwards towards the 'circumference' of the state for it to be truly non-violent; that is, both empowering and emotionally harmless. However, the structure of the colonial institutions that exist in India does not allow that to happen, because power is still concentrated at the top and not with the individual. The individual cannot delegate power that he or she does not have. Colonization violently supplanted modern Eurocentric fields of production in India, and decolonization must not mean a similarly violent revival of indigenous institutions. Indigenous natives, however, can manipulate the *field,* and the only non-violent method of such manipulation is *Satyagraha.* Culturally, Indians prefer deliberation to decisions and therefore institutionally avoid conflicts (Luhmann, 1988). The reason behind this is that, as a society, India customarily has not been focused on the enforcement of rights but on the performance of duties, relationships, and solidarity in society, taking precedence over personal desires (Austin, 2003). The only way for this kind of social solidarity to survive in colonized Indian society, where Eurocentric influences have taken root, is through the harmonization of modern institutions with traditional institutions.

5 Conclusions

A lot of research has already been conducted on the problems of political institutions in India, some of which concludes that these problems may be directly linked to India's colonial past. However, where my research differs from the rest is in identifying the structural corruptions of the colonial political field that were transplanted into India. As explained in the section on the transplantation of the colonial political field into India, the problem cannot be resolved at the institutional level because colonization not only corrupted these modern institutions by transplanting them into a society which was neither pre-modern nor European. It also, at the same time, destituted the indigenous institutions, which resulted in Indian society becoming stuck somewhere between a pre-colonial society and a corrupted version of a modern society, existing in a perpetual state of conflict. At this stage, it cannot go back to the pre-colonial version, as this would definitely lead to unprecedented violence (both physical and epistemic), and because the modern version is corrupted and out of time and place in the Indian context, it cannot modernize either. One of the most important findings of this research is that it was not the modern political field that was extended into India through the extension of the British Empire; rather, it was what Bourdieu (2004) calls the *dynastic field*, still in the process of differentiating in England and retaining its orig-

inal structure. Through a critical analysis of the natives' colonial struggles in this field, I concluded, with the help of Guha (1982), that this led to the feudalization of Indian society. The consequence of this finding was that colonization did not just set India on a path to modernization but also on a path to conditions of pre-modernity. The modernization of Indian society is a consequence of colonization, but colonization is not the cause of its modernization.

In fact, it is the reason why modern solutions to the problems of a modern democracy do not seem to work in India. The structuring structures of the corrupted colonial political field keep preventing it from fully differentiating into a modern field as it did in England; rather, its feudal structure, where various forms of symbolic capital are repeatedly converted into political capital, is preserved through the *mimetic* 'practice' of the dominant native agents who want to preserve their dominant status by preserving the feudal character of the colonial field itself.

It was also clearly established in the preceding discussion that it was this extension of the colonial political field through colonization that led to the destitution of the indigenous institution of *Panchayats*. Colonization resulted in the construction of the Indian state and the concentration of what Bourdieu calls 'statist capital' at the top of this colonial state machinery. However, this also meant that symbolic power in a largely differentiated Indian society became concentrated among a few dominant agents within the new colonial meta-field of power (Bourdieu & Farage, 1994). As pointed out earlier, coloniality and modernity are two sides of the same coin (Mignolo, 2009), but decoloniality cannot mean de-modernization. Even at the level of discourse, it is impossible to de-modernize the colonial political field without epistemic violence, and furthermore, it will not serve the purpose of decolonization; all it will achieve is further destitution of Indian society into the pre-modern.

Decolonization, therefore, can be achieved only within a Gandhian framework of the non-violent decentralization of the colonial state. The symbolic power that was concentrated at the dominant end of the colonial political field through the process of colonization that constructed India needs to be deconstructed at an epistemic level through the Gandhian empowerment of individual citizens. This cannot be achieved through the devolution of power by the state, as paradoxically such devolution would also mean that the symbolic power of individual agents is still represented by the dominant agents in the field. At an epistemic level, it requires *Satyagraha* to be part of every individual agent within the colonial political field, which would mean the empowerment of all citizens. *Panchayats* cannot be revived, but they may be restituted within the colonized political field if, through *Satyagraha,* individual agents are able to manipulate the field boundaries of the colonial political field in such a way that 'structural corruption' is introduced into it. Such structural corruption may change the character of this colonial field into something that is no longer political but instead based on the solidarity Gandhi imagined.

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Purity/impurity in Islam:
Shifting hierarchies between religious and secular attitudes in the case of female genital mutilation/cutting (khifad) in Egypt

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Abstract

This study delves into the topic of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), referred to as khifador khitan al-banat in Arabic, from a specific perspective. It uses FGM/C as a case study to explore changes in attitudes towards science and the well-being of women in contemporary Sunni Muslim religious law. From a Western perspective, FGM/C is commonly viewed as a practice that reinforces and perpetuates entrenched patriarchal and hierarchical structures within Islam. Traditional Islamic views often associate it with concepts of sacred ritual purity. Nevertheless, while the practice of khifad remains prevalent in Egypt, the surrounding debate illustrates the shift between 'religious and secular' trends within Sunni Muslim law, where significant changes can be observed in the direction of rationalization. The latest trend may offer hope in the fight against FGM/C. Methodology: Qualitative content analysis of 47 related Arabic fatwas from different digital fatwa portals.

Keywords: *Islam, modernization, changing social values, religious law, FGM/C*

1 Introduction

The issue of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) sparks lively debate in Egypt nowadays, revolving around distinguishing this practice from sacred tradition and the reinterpretation of religious law to make possible the abandonment of FGM/C without violating the principle of ritual purity. 'There is no evidence in Islamic law that necessitates *khitan al-banat*,[1] nor is it part of the Prophetic tradition, nor an honorable act' –

as the Egyptian branch of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) summarizes the religious law opinion that bans the custom (al-Al-Awa, 2006, p. 10). However, this position is just one of several conflicting narratives. Despite the prohibitive fatwas, the social practice of FGM/C is still widespread, as rival narratives have emerged and strengthened its legitimacy. To understand the social embeddedness of different narratives and their impact on practice, it is important to briefly review some key elements of the relationship between Arab modernization and classical religious law. It is also essential to highlight Egypt's influence – and the impact of the formulated narratives – on European and global Sunni Muslim diasporas.

[1] "Khitan al-banat" is used here as a synonym for FGM/C (for terminology, see below).

In the nineteenth century, the presence of European states in the Middle East and North Africa highlighted the need for coordination between traditional systems and European modernity. While territorial states alienated traditional society, colonizers acknowledged the importance of integrating conventional institutions into governing practices, including religious authority. The institutionalization of Al-Azhar in Egypt is a core example of this process.

Al-Azhar Mosque is the leading authority on religious law and scholarship, representing State Islam in Egypt and influencing government decisions through its fatwa office (Dar al-Ifta). It actively combats extremism and opposes global political Islam[2]; however, institutionalized state Islam is just one among many actors that influence current narratives.

In Sunni Islam, the opinions of classical religious intellectuals (*ulema' and fuqaha'*) have always been influential in shaping values and social norms. Their legal opinions, which have served as recommended moral guidelines, are not binding; however, they have always been significant in shaping values. These opinions are the fatwas – 'non-binding Islamic Sharia rules' (Salhein, 2018, p. 1).

Sunni Islam did not develop a hierarchically organized church, and specific differences and distinctions have been recorded in religious legal opinions. The four historical schools of religious law (*Hanbali, Hanafi, Maliki,* and *Shaf'ii*) also preserve their divisions. Historically, customs were tied to territory, and community members practiced the customs followed by their community as 'Islamic rule'.[3] In modern times, the diversity of opinions has become even more complex.[4] According to individual perceptions, members select among muftis based on their preferences. A new trend, the digital fatwa, has emerged, where State authorities and independent 'influencer' muftis equally share their opinions – an era of 'fatwa-shopping' (Salhein, 2018, p. 1) has begun.

The spread of neo-conservative interpretations via digital fatwas highlights the complex historical ties between Islam and innovation. Throughout Islamic history, views on innovation have oscillated between 'practical innovation' and 'heresy,' with progressivism thriving in prosperous times and conservatism emerging in crises. In the eighth century, al-Shaf'ii, the founder of the madhab, asserted that 'religious ideas must align with practical life' (Goldziher, 1981, p. 215), thus supporting beneficial innovations while rejecting harmful ones. Modern innovations challenge traditional beliefs by affirming the validity of secular science.

The study hypothesizes that *khifad* exemplifies a shift between religious and secular attitudes within Sunni Muslim law in Egypt. While the practice remains prevalent in Egypt, significant changes are evident, including a new rationalization within religious law and the growing recognition of secular sciences.

1.1. The relevance of Egypt

In Egypt, the prevalence of female genital mutilation/cutting is estimated at over 80 per cent in 2023 despite government and religious prohibitions (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2023).

[2] Since the 1990s, Azhar has been actively shaping public opinion but has been criticized for bias toward the state and is challenged by the opposing political Islam (Barraclough, 1998; Brown, 2011).

[3] Asad (2009) describes the phenomenon as discursive traditions.

[4] Sociological (Barakat, 1993; Gellner, 1995) and anthropological (Asad, 2009; Tapper, 1995) literature analyzes the topic.

Al-Azhar is a prominent institution of Sunni Islam located in Egypt, has a significant impact on Egyptian government decisions, and makes efforts to combat extremism globally. The International Conference of Islamic Scholars, held at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, resulted in a fatwa (Gomaa, 2006) banning FGM/C, which was followed by stricter penalties[5] in the Egyptian Penal Code in 2008 and 2016.

The Muslim Brotherhood, which originated in Egypt, articulates the strongest narrative that challenges Al-Azhar. The Muslim Brotherhood covers a diverse scope of ideas and activities, from fundamentalist political Islam to appeals to local opponents, and promotes its Islamic interpretation globally. A prominent Egyptian preacher, Yusuf Qaradawi (1926–2022), was a strong 'influencer mufti' known for his moderate views within the Muslim Brotherhood. He had a profound impact on European and global discourse on various issues, including FGM/C, as described below.

All narratives related to FGM are closely tied to Egypt and significantly influence both local and global discourses.

2 Methodology

2.1. Digital fatwas as primary sources

The sample presented here was selected by filtering different digital fatwa portals according to specific criteria: (1) encompassing three categories of religious opinions: (a) Institutional state Islam, (b) Non-state Islamist reformist with a global impact; and (c) Hybrid portals mixing state Islamic and non-state elements; (2) possessing both regional and international significance; and (3) playing a significant role in shaping opinions. The following sources were chosen:

1.) Al-Azhar and its Institutional Fatwa Office, Dar al-Ifta (dar-alifta.org), representing the official position of Egypt, supported by state religious law.

2) Non-state Islamic reformist portals, not affiliated with any particular territory, which are often run by civil society organizations. These efforts aim to expand their audience and significantly influence the discourse. In this research, I have chosen to focus on the positions of two such influential opinion leaders:

a) Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1926–2022), who preached a moderate form of fundamentalism and was associated with the Qatari branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. He aimed to combat 'misinterpretations' and significantly influenced the Qatari narrative and the concept of minority Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh al-aqalliya) in Europe (Wollner, 2021).

b) Muhammad Saaleh al-Munajjid (1960-), who established the IslamQA portal in 1996. The site advocates for Salafi-fundamentalist reformist views associated with the radical branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is the most popular site of its kind. Non-governmental Salafism poses a strong ideological challenge to the official Saudi state narrative, which is why the Saudi state has banned IslamQA. 3) Hybrid sources, which merge state and non-state aspects of religious authority, like *Islamweb.* The portal claims to provide balanced and moderate views free from bias and extremism. The hybrid portal focuses on both the in-

[5] Punishment for FGM/C under Article 242a (2016) of the Penal Code was tightened: 1) it was changed from a 'crime of desperation' [misdemeanor] to a 'crime' [felony], 2) criminal liability was extended, and 3) it can no longer be settled by agreement. The penalty for performing FGM/C was increased to five to seven years' imprisonment. In addition, persons who request the procedure or escort the victim to the perpetrator may be punished by one to three years' imprisonment. If death results, the punishment is 15 years. Source: Dar el-Ifta'-Sauqi 5832, 6711, 4678/ 14888. (2018:19)

stitutional state's role in Islam and non-state activities, as well as Islamic proselytism (d*a'wa*).

2.2. Methodology of qualitative content analysis of fatwas

The guidance of Sántha (2022) was used to establish the research protocol, profile matrix, and code scheme. For coding, a priori open coding, axial coding, and occasionally in vivo coding were applied, and MAXQDA software was utilized (2022). The time interval of the studied fatwas is from 1998 to 2022. Fatwas were filtered for the keywords and categories *'khifad,' 'khitan al-banat,' 'khitan al-untha,' 'khitan al-nisa,'* and *'khitan al-mara'*. In reviewing the exact number of hits, the most relevant fatwas were added to the sample. When the text no longer generated new codes, or when codes referred to each other, we considered the sample saturated.

Forty-seven fatwas were selected from various sources after filtering out those that did not thoroughly discuss female circumcision. The fatwa selection criteria are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Distribution of Fatwas

Khifad fatwas	**islam QA**	**islamweb.net**	**Qaradawi**	**Azhar**	**Target**	**All**
Arab	**12**	**20**	**4**	**8**	**3**	**47**
Further hits on keywords						
khitan al-banat	72	23	3	78	0	176
khitan al-nisa	74	33	3	600	0	710
khitan al-inath	28	18	7	49	0	102
khitan al-mara	70	32	6	600	0	708

Source. islamqa.info, islamweb.net, qaradawi.net, dar-alifta.org, target-nehberg.de (2024)

2.3. Terminology

The World Health Organization (WHO) uses the term 'female genital mutilation' (FGM), while other groups prefer 'cutting' to minimize stigmatization. 'The practice was known as "female circumcision" till the 1980s. In the 1970s, the term Female Genital Mutilation was coined by an Australian-American feminist, Hosken. The WHO recommended the use of it in 1991' (Mukabi et al., 2022, p. 1985). The term 'female circumcision' is avoided in Western human rights discourse due to its anatomical inaccuracy. However, a brief review of the English-language sections of the examined Arabic fatwas proves that the term 'FGM/C' is almost absent. It is mentioned only by Al-Azhar, which summarizes its position to international organizations.

In Arabic texts, the most common term is 'circumcision of girls' (*khitan al-banat*). The exact term *khitan* generally means 'male circumcision', but in fatwas, it is usually used to refer to the female version as well.

Another Arabic term, *khifad,* appears in fatwas and translates to 'reduction or appeasement.' According to Lane's Arabic Lexicon (1863), it can also mean 'to make oneself noble, to make life easier.' The IslamQA9412 (2022) fatwa distinguishes between males and females using this sentence. 'Circumcise the boy (ghulam) with khitan and calm the (slave) girl (jariyya) with khifad.' The term *khifad* appears eighteen times in the 47 fatwas that were examined. At the same time, feminine terms for

circumcision, like 'circumcision of girls, – females, – women (khitan al-banat, -al-inath, -mara)' appeared more than two hundred times and were also used by respondents in my primary empirical interviews. Based on the analyzed samples, we can state that the expression 'female circumcision' is still vivid in Arabic terminology.

In the JSTOR database, the term 'Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting' returned 1840 hits, 'FGM' 3439, and 'Female Circumcision' 13,217 hits, as of 2025.07.21. Despite the criticisms of the term 'female circumcision', I also use it for the above reasons.

3 The social practice of FGM/C in Egypt

The practice of FGM is widespread in the Sahel belt and the Nile Valley, where it is common among Muslims, and still occurs in some Christian and Animist communities.[6] Notable studies claim that FGM/C is more strongly linked to ethnic traditions than religion (Farina & Ortensi, 2014; Knight, 2001; Mackie, 1996).

Mukabi et al. (2022, p. 1985) argue that although FGM/C is often embedded in Islamic practice, it has pre-Islamic origins, and it is wrong to interpret it as an 'Islamic custom.'

UN reports (2008, 2018, 2023) describe three main types of FGM/C. Type I: partial or complete excision of the clitoris. Type II: excision of the clitoris and labia minora, with or without removal of the labia majora. Type III: infibulation, removal of the labia majora, narrowing and suturing of the vaginal opening (Mukabi et al., 2022). In urban Egypt, Type I, known as *khitan al-Sunna*, is most common, but other types are also reported.

The typology of FGM/C raises many questions, which I shall discuss in detail in the next chapter.

FGM/C is most commonly performed in Egypt at around the age of seven, most often by female relatives. Since the practice affects children, UNICEF and UNFPA are cooperating to combat it through the Joint Program on FGM/C.

FGM has its roots in pre-Islamic antiquity. There is no evidence for infibulation, but it has been established that some form of female circumcision was practiced in ancient Egypt. Mackie (2000) and Knight (2001) trace the practice's origin to the Kushite-Meroite civilization, which existed in Upper Egypt and historical Nubia between 6 BC and 4 AD. In the Kushite region, both later religions, Christianity and Islam, incorporated local customs and were transmitted as part of religious traditions. Islam integrated FGM/C into the Shafi'i ritual,[7] according to Goldziher (1981).

A wealth of literature has been produced in support of international campaigns (END FGM/C, Joint Program on FGM/C). Mackie (1996, 2000) employs game theory to analyze the feasibility of eliminating the custom and offers an action plan based on game theory models. Khafagi (2001) writes about breaking cultural taboos: 'Research in Egypt shows that the practice persists because of a belief that circumcision will moderate female sexuality, assure a girl's marriageability and that it is sanctioned by religion' (Khafagi, 2001). She refers to the Demographic Health Survey from 1995 and states that 88 per cent of mothers would prefer FGM/C for their daughters, and references a national survey (1999), which mentions an 86 per cent prevalence rate among girls aged 13–19.

[6] Jocelyn Murray (1976) presents a Kenyan Christian community where FGM III (infibulation) is performed
[7] The Sunni school of religious law, founded by Mohamed al-Shafi'i in the eighth century.

Riegg (2009) explores the relationship between Muslim family law, marriage customs, and clitoridectomy. This study examines the economic risks associated with marriage and divorce laws within the framework of rational choice theory. Grande (2010) proposes a rethinking of the critical issues raised by the tension between normative human rights and multiculturalism. Farina and Ortensi (2014) investigated the transmission of tradition from mother to daughter. Mukabi et al. (2022) analyzed the myths and misconceptions that perpetuate customs.

International organizations are making significant efforts to end FGM/C. Global attention to the issue increased due to Arab feminism, which addressed taboo topics (Moghadam, 2004; Tzoreff, 2014) The issue of clitoridectomy was raised at the 1980 UN conference in Copenhagen by Nawal as-Saadawi, an Egyptian feminist activist, prompting UNICEF to add it to its agenda (El Saadawi, 1980). UN Women supports a 2010–2030 Action Plan, under the umbrella of the Sustainable Development Goals, to end FGM by 2030 and address global gender inequalities by funding various reports and initiatives (Carter, 2020).

Intergovernmental organizations such as UNFPA-UNICEF (2017–2020) and NGO-based campaigns like END FGM EU network 2020 are working together to combat FGM/C while recognizing the importance of religious law.

The Matanda report (2022) analyzes 115 peer-reviewed articles on FGM/C prevention from 2008 to 2020, discussing the successes and challenges, and states among its findings that 'health education and community dialogues with parents and religious leaders can change attitudes towards FGM' (Matanda, 2022, p. 17).

A German NGO called TARGET achieved a significant milestone by getting Al-Azhar to organize an International Conference of Islamic Scholars in Cairo. The conference resulted in Al-Azhar issuing a fatwa in 2006 banning the practice.

Despite these achievements, the practice remains prevalent in Egypt today. The Joint Program on FGM/C (UNFPA-UNICEF) publishes reports of longitudinal research (2008, 2018, 2021, 2023) and provides detailed documentation. Annual reports indicate a prevalence rate of over 97 per cent in Egypt in 2021 and above 80 per cent in 2023.[8] The Egyptian Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS, 2015) also provides detailed statistics, indicating its continued practice among girls aged 15-19, 79 per cent among those aged 15-49, 87 per cent among those aged 45-49, and 97 per cent among women aged 45-49. The Egyptian Family Health Survey (2022) found a prevalence rate of 86 per cent.

My small-scale primary field research in Cairo (2022) complements this study and supports the observations of current practice. It was limited to obtaining primary data from 33 female informants about whether they had undergone FGM/C or whether their small daughters would be subjected to it.[9] Of 33 informants, 9 agreed to tell their whole story (Wollner, 2024). The sample findings are consistent with those of representative survey data, indicating the prevalence of the custom (see the sociometric matrix in Table 2). In the present study, 27 out of 30 participants reported undergoing FGM/C; 14 respondents were between 20 and 35 years old,[10] 21 of 30 live in Subra (a middle-class neighborhood in Cairo), and the rest live in other parts of Cairo or

[8] The Joint Program Report (2023) states that the prevalence rate in Egypt is above 80 per cent, and approx. 20 per cent of women and 30 per cent of men still support FGM/C.

[9] Thirty respondents were adults; data on three children come from their mothers.

[10] The average age of the informants is 33.7 years; the youngest was 5 years old (3 people were younger than 18 years old), and the oldest was 82 years old. Children were not directly involved; their mothers were asked about their preference for FGM.

abroad. Twenty-one participants are married, and 29 wear a headscarf (*hijab*). Twenty participants have children; among mothers, the average number of children is 3.1.

The practice was widespread in the group and was not influenced by economic factors or education.[11] Some oppose it, but others support it and want it to continue. The state ban is leading to a decline in the practice, and signs of change are visible, but the internal motivations for its elimination remain varied.

Table 2 Sociometric Matrix of the Cairo Field Research (2022)

Variable	Category	Number of people	Mean
Prevalence of FGM	Yes	27	**81.8%**
Age	Age mean	33	33.7 years
Age group	20-35 years	14	42.4%
Education	High School	20	60.6%
Job	Housewife	13	39.4%
Have Children	Yes	20	60.6%
Number of Children	Mean number of children (among those who have children)	20	3.1 children
Marriage Status	Married	21	63.6%
Headscarf	wearing hijab	29	87.9%
Living Area	Shubra	21	63.6%

4 Social and ritual purity

This chapter focuses on why FGM/C is a good example of shifts in purity values in Egypt.

Before I present the central claims, I wish to highlight two critical observations:

First, *FGM/C is not generally practiced:* Where it is not practiced, it is seen as an old pre-Islamic custom that is not obligatory. However, where it is practiced, it is linked to fundamental Muslim religious law and ritual purity, and its elimination is not feasible.

Second, *all religious legal narratives reject so-called 'non-Sunnah' (not considered Islamic) practices* known as '*Pharaonic circumcision*'[12] which have pre-Islamic origins and are labeled *'ignorant' (jahil)* by all (even conservative) narratives. The debate focuses on the *'Sunnah method'*, which is believed to have its source in the prophetic tradition. It is classified as a Type 1 method: removal of the *'foreskin'* (with or without the clitoris). (There is debate in fatwas about what exactly should be removed during such procedures – only part or the whole clitoris. Even conservative fatwas do not agree on this. Progressives who want to ban the custom use this ambiguity as an argument for the ban).

Next, I examine the elements that distinguish *khifad* from other issues of ritual purity and use it as an excellent example for reviewing value shifts associated with modernity.

[11] Twenty-one of them come from the same middle-class neighborhood; 20 participants had graduated from high school.

[12] In the Western typology, this may be classified as Type 2 or 3. Mainly practiced in Sub-Saharan Africa

4.1. Khifad is related to a special case of ritual purity – to 'fitrah'

Rich literature (Simon, 2024; Gellner, 1995; Gauvian, 2005. p. 372) defines ritual purity as a 'binder of social cohesion'. The Muslim sacred law (*sharia*) involves prescribed actions in two main categories: i) religious duties of individuals to God (*'ibada*) and ii) rules of co-existence; responsibilities of members to each other (*mua'amala*). The book of ritual purity (*Kitab at-Tahara*) is presented at the beginning of the section on personal duties (*'ibada*) in hadith collections.[13] Several academic sources have analyzed the close relationship between social practices and religious law.[14] Burge (2010), Gauvain (2005), and Strathern and Stewart (2004) explore the role of Muslim ritual purity law in shaping contemporary identity. Mariam Katz (2002) summarizes the emergence, development, and consolidation of ritual purity law, presenting the three main categories of Muslim ritual purity: (1) 'Small impurities' – these refer to minor ritual pollutions (certain bodily fluids, physiological needs), which are mainly removed by performing ritual ablution before prayer (*wudu'*). (2) 'Big impurities' refers to the washing away of major impurities (defilements that require the purification of the whole body) (*ghusl*), e.g., in the case of sexual intercourse or menstruation. (3) The third category refers to things that are impure in their substance with which contact or consumption as food is prohibited, such as alcohol, pork, dog, and carrion. Katz relates the concept of impurity to *losing control* over the body (Katz, 2002, p. 15).

Among the sub-cases of personal ritual purity, one category is a prerequisite for all further ritual activity: *fitrah.* According to Qur'anic anthropology (cf. Qur'an 30:30), God created man in a pre-existing state after a contract acknowledging God's divinity. *Fitrah* can be defined as the innate inclination towards the original 'religious human nature' that God created. Following the actions described by the *fitrahs* prepares the body for further ritual purity. In religious law, *fitrahs* are covered in the chapter on ritual purity (*tahara*) and believer duties (*ibadah*), which include five purification methods, including circumcision.[15] Religious law generally views male circumcision (*khitan*) as *fitrah* and part of personal ritual purity. The female version generates debate. If female circumcision is considered similarly to male circumcision and linked to *fitrah*, it may be seen as a contributor to ritual purity, making prohibition unfeasible. But if it is separated from *fitrah*, it can be prohibited without harming the principle of ritual purity.

4.2. Khifad includes all elements of purity value – social, ritual, and even hygienic

While the male *khitan* is associated with *fitrah* and personal ritual purity, the female version combines ritual purity with social purity. It ensures a *ritually pure female body* and a *pure marital and social life*. The value of social purity (and its subcategory, female modesty) is more likely to be linked to the other branch of religious law – the rule of co-existence (*mu'ammala*). This branch includes family law, marriage customs, issues of honor, and the protection of virginity. These are often analyzed as aspects of FGM/C,

[13] Al-Ghazālī's Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn (Būlāq, 1269 AH/1853 CE) provides a classical discussion of ritual purity. Hadith collections consulted via Sunnah.com: Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Nasāʾī, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī, Ibn Mājah, al-Muwaṭṭaʾ, and Musnad Aḥmad (sunnah.com).

[14] The literature on Muslim society (Barakat, 1993; Gellner, 1995) analyzes the relationship between legal systems and practices from a sociological perspective. The literature on the anthropology of Islam (Asad, 2009; Tapper, 1995) interprets the different representations and social embeddedness of Islam.

[15] 1. circumcision (khitan), 2. cutting the nails (taklim al-adzfir), 3. pulling out the armpit hair (nataf al-ibt), 4. shaving the pubic hair (istihdad), and 5. trimming the mustache (qass as-sarib); Sunan an-Nasai 5044, Jami at-Tirmidhi 2756, Sunan Ibn Majah 292.

embedded in the group's traditions and customs.

4.3. The clash with Western universalism (human rights) in religious debates is significant

The clash appears in the debate about religious law, not 'outside' it between Islam and the West. Institutional state Islam in Egypt is more aligned with Western human rights values in that it rejects the analogy of *khifad* with male *khitan*, separating custom from ritual purity. In contrast, the traditionalist position emphasizes the analogy linking *khifad* to ritual purity and *fitrah*.

4.4. Significant disagreement in Sunni Muslim religious law

Differences (*ikhtilafat*) between schools of jurisprudence *have been a fundamental feature of legal interpretation* throughout Islamic history. The strength of arguments is determined by the level of consensus (*ijma'*) or differences (*ikhtilafat*) among the dominant *madhabs*. The possibility of differences is slight in cases with a high consensus rate among earlier scholars – e.g., in the Quranic cases. Variations are greater in the case of prophetic stories (*hadith*) or interpretations of analogies (*qiyas*).[16] The issue of individual interpretations (*ijtihad*) sparks debate. Historically, rites were tied to territory; in modernity, competitive narratives have emerged.

The historical Cushitic region, in the Nile Valley, is where pre-Islamic customs originated. This region historically follows the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam. The Shafi'i school considers female circumcision to be similar to male circumcision and obligatory (*wajib*)(al-Al-Awa, 2006, p. 8). Historically, the other three *madhhab*s consider *khifad* desirable (*mustahabb*) or an honorable right (*haqq muhtaram*), a privilege that allows women to participate in the Abrahamic covenant, just like men. Al-Azhar also held this position during the tenure of Grand Imam Jad el-Haqq in the 1990s (Barraclough, 1998, p. 248).

The significant changes in religious law began at the turn of the millennium. International campaigns influenced state Islam and moderate religious leaders. Scholar Yusuf Qaradawi reclassified it from desirable (*mustahabb*) to permissible (*mubah*), and Al-Azhar, the institution of state Islam under the leadership of the Grand Imam, Sayyed al-Tantawi, declared FGM to be forbidden (*haram*).

In the fatwas, we can detect a shift toward secular science; simple religious arguments are no longer sufficient to address complex issues. Actors like Al-Azhar as an institution and Qaradawi as a moderate scholar are exploring ways to harmonize them with Western values and scientific ideas. In contrast, conservative scholars like Muhammad Saaleh al-Munajjid rely on legitimizing myths.

Overall, FGM serves as an excellent case for examining the value shift in Islam through the analysis of religious legal narratives. The method employed for this research is the content analysis of fatwas.

5 Results of qualitative content analysis

The traditional structure of fatwas is question-answer. Fatwas can be categorized either by the questions they address or the answers they provide. Below, I present a typology based on answers. Three distinct narratives emerge:

[16] A religious legal interpretation technique used in similar cases.

1) The *conservative, khifad-supportive narrative,* represented by Muhammad Saaleh al-Munajjid (IslamQA) and Islamweb. This position considers *khifad* part of ritual purity and fitrah. Certain restrictions regarding the extent of cutting are conceivable, but complete prohibition is not possible according to this position.

2) A *moderate fundamentalist position*, represented by Yusuf Qaradawi: In his initial fatwas, 2006–2009, he considered *khifad* permissible (*mubah*), which is a sharia category that refers to things that are permissible but can be prohibited in justified cases. In a later fatwa in 2012, he shared Al-Azhar's position and committed to the ban.

3) A progressive narrative, represented in this case by Al-Azhar and its Grand Mufti, Ibrahim Sauqi al-Allam. This narrative prohibits this practice, distinguishes it from ritual purity and *fitrah*, and rejects the Abrahamic analogy. Al-Azhar committed to the related ban after 2006.

Across the three narratives, the answers can be organized into four key thematic 'panels'.

Panel 1 contains the religious legal argumentation:

a) Qur'anic interpretations of the Abrahamic covenant, especially the 'millet of Ibrahim' in the Qur'an 16:123

b) Questions regarding the authenticity and reliability of the prophetic traditions (hadith) attributed to Aisha, Um 'Attiya, and Umm Habiba

c) Explanations of sharia categories that classify actions as permissible (halal) or forbidden (haram) (Qaradawi, 1999). The halal category is further divided into subcategories: obligatory (wajib), recommended (mustahabb), permissible (mubah), and disliked (makruh). The shifts in these categories conceal essential aspects of values. Panel 2: Legitimizing myths and fixed beliefs that maintain customs explain the regional differences.

These texts reveal another layer of *rationalization* associated with 'European modernity.' The traditionalist position uses *myths* as system-justifying stereotypes, which rely on modernity (Jost & Banaji, 1994).

The fatwas refer to myths like 'extreme female desire,' 'oversized clitoris,' and 'differences between Western and Eastern women,' portraying them as dangers that *khifad* can prevent.

Panel 3 contains arguments regarding the immanent principles of religious law and explores the internal reasoning. The panel highlights key principles such as the *'prohibition of changing God's creation*' or the '*public interest*' (*maslaha*), which is often linked here to the interests of women.

The most significant legal principle is the *'prohibition of harm'* (*darar wa dirar*), which is closely aligned with Western human rights argumentation. This panel presents the internal principles of Muslim religious law and the pursuit of harmonization with Western values.

Panel 4, the focus of this study, analyzes the shift between religious and secular attitudes in the case of FGM/C. It illustrates how religious reasoning responds to the challenges posed by secular science. It presents a general perspective linked to the narrative of secular science and summarizes specific medical arguments about *khifad*. This panel highlights the growing recognition of secular science and the challenge traditional religious law must also address.

6 Shift between religious and secular attitudes in the case of FGM/C

The analysis shows that all arguments emphasize the importance of modern science and its increasing credibility. In cases of contradiction between science and religion, the analysis shows diverse reasoning techniques. Two main characteristics may be observed: (a) varying perspectives on the primacy of religion and science, and (b) discursive reasoning (selective rationalization). Secular scientific discoveries cannot easily undermine the legitimacy of sacred texts, but all narratives face unprecedented challenges.

6.1. Conservative response: Primacy of religion

IslamQA and Islamweb represent the conservative, pro-*khifad* narrative. Generally, fundamentalist-reformist Islam advocates for religious law '*reform*', even if they claim a more rigid re-interpretation of *sharia* on issues such as statehood and social norms. Traditional religiosity, in general matters, supports traditionalism (*taqlid*) and rejects changes or 'reformist demands.' However, concerning FGM/C, the positions are reversed. Traditional religiosity, in this case, promotes progressive change, whereas fundamentalist reformism supports the preservation of established traditions.

1) *Science-Religion in general*

Scientific reasoning and so-called 'medical reflections' are prevalent in conservative fatwas as well. From this perspective, secular science supports religious arguments. In cases of contradiction, religious arguments take precedence, emphasizing the authority of sacred texts. 'We are certain of its benefits and lack of harm because if it were harmful, God Almighty and His Messenger would not have legislated it. (...) It is not right to leave [the prophet's] guidance and teachings to someone else's word, even if he is a doctor, because medicine is only a science that evolves and constantly changes its perspective' (IslamQA60314, 2005). 'We all know the practice of our true religion, and there is no doubt that everything in it is good, including the health aspects. Even if we do not see its benefits today, we will surely understand them later' (Islam QA 45528, 2005). 'The opinions of doctors are not final; every day brings new inventions that should change our views' (IslamQA60314, 2005). These arguments favor adherence to traditions and the primacy of religion. Medical insights are essential, but only as long as they do not contradict sacred texts. The role of secular science is to support religious arguments.

2) *Medical Benefits: Pro-FGM/C Argumentation*

In conservative fatwas, the medical arguments related to male and female circumcision are often unclear; examples of this include references to secretions accumulated under the foreskin and odors, as well as arguments about urinary infections. Medical arguments in favor of the practice are mentioned in 14 of the 23 analyzed conservative fatwas. The most significant one, titled 'Medical Benefits of Girls' Circumcision' (*Fawa'id al-Tibbiyya min Khitan al-Banat*) (IQ45528, 2005), has the highest number of views (over 1 million) in the category. 'Accumulated discharge from the labia minora in the foreskin becomes rancid, has an unpleasant smell, and can lead to inflammation of the vagina or urethra (...) Circumcision reduces clitoris hypersensitivity, which can grow up to three centimeters (...), and prevents the appearance of the so-called female erection (*ana'az al-nisa'*), which is a harmful enlargement of the clitoris that causes repeated pain' (QA45528, 2005).

These medical arguments legitimize myths rather than reflect actual medical sci-

ence. Although religion prevails in these fatwas, there is an attempt to support their claims with science.

6.2. Yusuf Qaradawi: The cautious position

Qaradawi remained cautious and took no stance in 2006. He considered *khifad* permissible (*mubah*) but stated that it originates from customary law (*'urf*), not religious law (*sharia*). In his 2012 fatwa, he rejected the practice. In his opinion, the Qur'an does not justify the custom. He considers the part concerning Abraham's religion (Q16:123) proof of monotheism (*tawhid*) and, at most, justification of male circumcision. In some cases of necessity (*darura*),[17] he is willing to make concessions, even in the case of male circumcision, if the practice would deter new followers of Islam (Qaradawi 10079 (2007), Pos. 80).

Qaradawi rejects the analogy between men and women, viewing them as fundamentally different in inheritance, marriage, and testimony. He recognizes *khifad* as a right or privilege for women in some instances, allowing them to share the Abrahamic Covenant equally with men.

1) *Science-Religion in general*

In Qaradawi's argument, science is central. Even his other works, such as *Permitted and Prohibited in Islam* (1999), underpin the arguments of religious law with the results of modern science. In the case of contradictions, he advocates considering scientific arguments and carefully revising religious law: 'We may have an excuse for contradicting the scholars who came before us because their era did not give them the information our era has given us. For this reason, they stated that the fatwa evolves with the passage of time, place, and circumstances. If what we have seen had become apparent to those before us, they would have changed their opinion because they were guided by the truth wherever it led' (Qaradawi5121 (2006) Pos. 202-203).

This argument pertains to secular rationalization practices and shares similarities with Al-Azhar's argument.

2) *Medical Arguments*

In his earlier fatwas (2006, 2007), he argued in favor of the permissibility of *khifad*. He required the procedure to be carried out under supervision and specified three criteria: 1. no exaggerated procedure (only a moderate process according to the *Sunnah* would be acceptable); 2. it should be performed by a doctor; and 3. in a sterile environment. He disagreed with banning the practice from healthcare facilities, as it may be performed anyway. He reflected on the legitimization of myths (the danger of growing an oversized clitoris, extreme desire) but left it to doctors to judge. 'Some jurists – and some doctors – prefer female circumcision for fear that sexual desire arises during adolescence or puberty, and this will lead to falling into sin' (Qaradawi 5121, 2006, Pos. 211).

Qaradawi takes a cautious stance, emphasizing the importance of scientific arguments. His view is close to Al-Azhar's: that one should separate specific issues from religious law and assign them to the competence of secular science.

6.3. Al-Azhar's progressive stance

The key document supporting the Al-Azhar argument is the 2006 Conference recommendation (*Tawsiyat al-Mu'atamar*), which aligns with the Cairo Declaration on Hu-

[17] Necessity (darura) and common interest (maslaha) in Islam are explained by Jany (2018).

man Rights in Islam (CDHRI, 1990). The main principles of the Al-Azhar recommendation are: 1) Human dignity is derived from the Qur'an (17:70). 2) Female genital mutilation/cutting is an ancient pre-Islamic practice not supported by Sunna, and 3) FGM/C should be prohibited based on the Islamic principle of the prohibition of harm (*darar wa dirar*), as it is harmful to women, thus classified as *haram* in sharia. Fundamentalist reformist Islam accuses and strongly criticizes Al-Azhar's position for being biased towards Western values and foreign influence.

Dar al-Ifta' issued eight fatwas on FGM/C in the examined period. DI5832 (2021) and DI6711 (2022) deserve special attention. Al-Azhar boldly removed FGM/C from the category of *fitrah*, distinguishing it from ritual purity.

1). *Science-Religion in general*

Azhar highlights the significance of secular science in Islamic law, creating a framework for religious regulations that incorporate modern scientific findings, all rooted in the Qur'an. Although this method is not new, the challenge of integrating secular science is unprecedented.

Dar al-Ifta 6711 cites the following section of the Qur'an to underpin the relevance of experts: '[Do not follow blindly what you do not know to be true]: ears, eyes, and heart, you will be questioned about all these'[18] (Q17:36). 'Ask those who know (ahl adz-dzakri) if you do not know' (Q16:43).[19] 'None can inform you [Prophet] like the One who is all aware' (Q35:14). Sections of the Qur'an, and the concept of innovation (*bida'*), can be interpreted in various ways, as already mentioned by Goldziher: 'The concept of useful innovation (bida' hasana) allows the adoption of new institutions to be theologically justified' (Goldziher, 1981:217).

In the way these Qur'anic passages establish respect for science, we can observe the method of harmonization within institutional Islam. The Al-Azhar argument provides a lengthy philosophical introduction about *'creation,' 'command,'* and the *'primacy of the Qur'an'* through a passage referred to as *'written among the lines'* (Q4:82). This method is, on the one hand, faithful to the sacred texts, but on the other hand, it opens the door to discursivity. It expands the scope for action without permitting individual interpretation (*ijtihad*). 'Everything in the sharia follows custom, and when the custom changes, so does the rule, which introduces a renewed custom. This is not a renewal of individual effort (ijtihad), which involves imitation and the question of eligibility for ijtihad. Still, these are rules in which jurists make efforts (ijtahada fiha), and if they agree on them, we will follow them without reference to ijtihad' (DI, 6711:94, 2022).

Azhar does not deny tradition and continuity; however, in cases of significant disagreement between schools (*madhab*), it shifts from adherence to conservative ritual rules. 'The jurists of the Madhabs established that if a new custom occurs in infinite time (zaman dun zaman), then the mufti has the right to issue a fatwa appropriate to the time. Even if it conflicts with what is contained in the books of his school, the latecomers, who violated what was written in the books of those before them, did so only because the custom changed according to the changing times. They knew that those who preceded them had the same circumstances in their time; they themselves give [new] fatwa' (DI 6711:73, 2022). Al-Azhar generally creates space for new, even secular institutions while maintaining continuity and limiting individual interpreta-

[18] DI6711 (2022), Pos. 20: the fatwa cites only the second part.

[19] '[Prophet], all the messengers We sent before you were simply men to whom We had given the Revelation: you [people] can ask those who have knowledge if you do not know' (Q16:43).

tion (*ijtihad*). Al-Azhar's argument reminds us of McBain (1927)'s secular concept of a 'Living Constitution': realities must be considered when interpreting a fundamental law, focusing on its spirit rather than literal interpretations.

2.) *Medical Arguments*

The Al-Azhar jurisprudence and its outstanding performance are evident in the fact that, while it does not explicitly recognize the primacy of science over religion, it excludes questions related to science from the domain of religious law and refers them to secular science. 'The jurists have determined that it is essential to consult doctors on many jurisprudential questions concerning the human body. Thus, they based many of their decisions on current medical knowledge' (DI5832:60, 2021). DI 5832:66 (2021) fatwa lists the severe health risks of *'female circumcision'*, based on secular medical science,[20] establishes the validity of the legal principle of prohibition of harm (*darar wa dirar*), and prohibits the custom.

Questions about the female body – in Sauqi's words – must be 'returned to the temporal life (wujud) and dealt with under its domains, such as medical research, monitoring, and surveillance' (DI5832:62, 2021). Al-Azhar does not legitimize myths. It recognizes the authority of secular science and incorporates it into religious law.

7 Conclusion

Female genital mutilation/cutting, as a case study, presents an example of a still vivid pre-modern connection to the system of sacred hierarchies in Egypt. Changes in attitudes are seen in the following areas:

1. The social debate surrounding it in empirical research demonstrates the individual choice between values. The empirical study shows that although the practice remains common today, the debate over it and the diversity of opinions are also reflected in social practice.

2. In religious debates, the power and role of scientific reasoning are increasing, alongside religious legal arguments. Rationalization is occurring, consistent with a central pillar of Western modernization theory.

The novelty of this rationalization lies in its systemic, long-term, all-encompassing nature. (Historical rationalization affects individual cases.) Ritual purity designates the points of attachment to the deep layers of identity. Pure religious argumentation is no longer sufficient, even in religious argumentation. The growing credibility of secular science appears in all narratives.

3. These narratives have a significant impact not only on practices in Egypt but also on Muslim diasporas in Europe and worldwide. Egypt plays a crucial regional role, influenced by Al-Azhar. Reformist fundamentalist perspectives on ritual purity are vital in shaping responses, such as reactive identity. Even the changes in FGM can be interpreted as a case study of Egypt; this analysis offers an insightful model of change in Muslim jurisprudence more broadly. The challenges of secular science and the pressure of human rights discourse are evident in every narrative. Religious law narratives play a significant role in ending FGM/C, and the key is to separate the latter from the category of ritual purity. The investigation of *khifad* reveals a process

[20] 'Excessive pain, heavy bleeding or serious infections are short-term; long-term narrowing or blockage of the urethra, difficulty with menstrual bleeding or severe pain during marital relations, psychological and social problems, harm of difficult natural childbirth, which can lead to the death of the mother or the child' (DI 5832:66, 2021).

of internal change in Islam.

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Policy monitoring and power hierarchies in Hungarian Roma integration:

The Roma Civil Monitor, the Hungarian government and the European Commission

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the hierarchical power relations and governance structures shaping Roma policy monitoring in Hungary, focusing on the interactions between civil society organizations (CSOs), the Hungarian government, and the European Commission (EC). It situates the Hungarian National Strategy for Roma Integration (NSRI) within broader EU frameworks and evaluates the Roma Civil Monitor as a case study of civil society involvement in policy oversight. Drawing on theories of hierarchical governance, multilevel governance (MLG), Europeanization, and Nancy Fraser's justice framework, the study investigates the power asymmetries embedded in Roma policy monitoring. It employs a dual methodology: meta-content analysis of EC and RCM reports, and qualitative interviews with experts involved in Roma monitoring. The findings show that while EU frameworks provide formal spaces for civil society participation, national political dynamics undermine the transformative potential of Roma inclusion strategies. Within this dynamic, the RCM produces critical analysis but is largely disempowered by political pressure. This is exacerbated by the European Commission, whose standardized monitoring approach lacks the contextual depth required to challenge the government effectively. This paper contributes to understanding how supranational and local monitoring mechanisms interact within hierarchical structures and argues for stronger accountability and Roma-led participation in shaping inclusive and justice-oriented policies.

Keywords: *Hierarchy, Civil Society, Monitoring, Public Policy, European Commission, Roma*

1 Introduction

This paper endeavors to dissect the intricate interplay between Roma civil society, Hungarian policy frameworks, and European Union (EU) mechanisms. Focusing on the impact of the evaluation reports of the Hungarian National Strategy for Roma Integration on Hungarian Roma policy, the article scrutinizes the consequences of the Roma Civil Monitoring (RCM) Report and the EC Report on the Hungarian government.

The Roma are estimated to number six million people in the EU and represent one of Europe's most marginalized minority groups. The effectiveness of the European Union in addressing issues of Roma exclusion rests upon the efficacy of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), a policy that will be discussed in this paper.

Matache (2017) has argued that the social policies employed by Hungary regarding the Roma have reinforced pejorative attitudes toward the need to assimilate the Roma and thus have worsened the power imbalance. While Hungary often showcases its minority policies as model examples for neighboring countries, the approach consistently excludes Roma concerns. Instead, the state continues to promote shallow and untargeted policies for Roma integration, with little to no emphasis on raising awareness among the majority population. This paper, therefore, aims to unpack the disconnect between Hungary's domestic approach and broader EU expectations.

The progress of Roma inclusion is 'too little and too slow,' as the poverty rate of the Roma has been stagnant since 2016. Four out of five Roma are at risk of poverty, every second Roma is currently living in housing deprivation without sanitation facilities, and four out of five Roma live in overcrowded households.[1] Ryder et al. (2020) explain this as being the result of spatial, social, and economic exclusion, as well as environmental racism, which has confined the Roma to ghetto communities. In 2022, the FRA published this data to provide a baseline for EU Member States to measure the effectiveness of their 2011 National Roma Integration Strategies. *In Hungary, 77 per cent of the Roma population is at risk of poverty, 28 per cent live in severe material deprivation, and 44 per cent study in segregated schools.*[2]

The 2011 EU NSRI was one of the major responses to Roma exclusion. The strategy package was inspired by the goals and plans of the Decade of Roma Inclusion and served as the foundation for the Hungarian framework, which was adopted by the Hungarian government in December 2011 (Rostas, 2019). The strategy framework is based on a governance model known as the OMC. This model stipulates that peer pressure can mobilize Member States to work towards common goals; however, in the end, the content of the NSRI is based on the political will of the state, and the obligations are based on peer pressure (Ryder et al., 2020). In this respect, the OMC is a soft instrument. It also places emphasis on civil society involvement and community participation.

The structure of this paper unfolds as follows. First, it offers a conceptual introduction to hierarchy, exploring how top-down approaches and shrinking civil society space affect Roma participation in policy. This section also introduces the hierarchical positioning between CSOs, the Hungarian government, and the EC. The discussion then moves to multilevel governance and Europeanization as analytical frameworks for understanding policy implementation. It concludes with a reflection on justice and representation, drawing on Nancy Fraser's theoretical contributions. Next, the paper briefly presents the NSRI's background, along with that of the Roma Civil Monitor – a coalition of NGOs tasked with evaluating the strategy.

Following this conceptual groundwork, the methodology section outlines the qualitative design of the research. The subsequent analysis draws on expert interviews and document analysis to investigate the political and structural consequences of hierarchical dynamics in policy monitoring.

Finally, the paper concludes with a reflection on the current state of Roma civil society advocacy and offers recommendations to strengthen monitoring, accountability,

[1] Fundamental Rights Report 2022, 08.06.2022, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-fundamental-rights-report-2022_en.pdf, Downloaded (03.04.2024)

[2] Fundamental Rights Report 2022, 08.06.2022, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-fundamental-rights-report-2022_en.pdf, Downloaded (03.04.2024)

and participation in both national and EU-level Roma inclusion strategies.

2 Literature review and conceptual framework

2.1. Hierarchical power relations

Hierarchy as a concept

The world order is based on power relations rooted in hierarchical dimensions. Hierarchy manifests in formal structures like employment roles, the caste system, and social classes, reflecting how power is distributed within everyday society. It is often associated with a chain of command and control and is pervasive in the modern world. Max Weber was one of the first to conceptualize the power and constraints of bureaucracy, noting how it could be impersonal and crushing to the human spirit and agency (Constas, 1958).

Regarding formal hierarchy, Börzel (2010) differentiates three types of institutionalized rule structures: market system competitions, negotiation systems, and hierarchy. These structures differ in the degree of coupling between the various entities. Across these forms, political agendas are determined through a mix of hierarchical and/or non-hierarchical coordination. In these dynamics, institutions enforce compliance – both physically and legally – while societies are organized by multiple, interacting hierarchies that evolve over time. In this paper, hierarchy is conceptualized not only as the distribution of power between different entities but also as the outcomes of such power, both bottom-up and top-down, forming a model of value that influences policy, including Roma integration.

Top-Down Hierarchies

Top-down interventions and hierarchies are the most prevalent approaches in development initiatives worldwide. Governments, international organizations, and donors often set the agenda for CSOs and global interventions. According to Kaiser (2020), top-down approaches have hindered development. Over the past fifty years, the money allocated for poverty reduction and growth has not yielded significant development outcomes. Initiatives led by powerful donor agencies have often involved experts at the top. While bottom-up approaches are crucial, they still depend on top-down financial backing (Ibid, pp. 92-93). Recent trends have begun to favor locally led initiatives – especially those endorsed by the EC – that seek to balance these approaches.

Top-down hierarchies in Hungary appear in social systems that target specific citizens while excluding others. The Hungarian government allocates tax benefits to working parents with children, which in turn excludes unemployed parents and those living below the poverty line (especially the Roma) from receiving social benefits (Bozóki, 2015). In Hungary, homelessness is currently criminalized. Moreover, the government's targeted initiatives primarily benefit government-friendly institutions and NGOs, while excluding NGOs that criticize it.

According to Börzel (2010), the EC's top-down hierarchy is evident in its power during infringement proceedings against Member States. On the other hand, decisions within the European Union are often based on voluntary coordination between Member States using soft tools. Additionally, European legislation is grounded in directives and regulations that outline objectives without specifying methods of implementation.

Hierarchy between Civil Society Organizations, the Government, and the EU

The European Union legislative process relies on both tangible and intangible hierarchies. Some decisions are legally binding and directly applicable. European governance has fostered political competition and innovative approaches, such as the OMC and mutual recognition between Member States (Börzel, 2010). Moreover, the Court of Justice has the authority to bind Member States by interpreting European law, solidifying the institutional framework based on a supranational hierarchy that dominates the policy process.

In Hungary, the EC has initiated various infringement proceedings and begun using funding conditionalities. Gulácsi and Kerényi (2023) described this through a study of the deficit procedure implemented by the EU, where Orbán's government reworked its economic policy to rebalance the state budget by reducing subsidies, imposing special corporate taxes, freezing certain prices, and redirecting pension funds. This happened in 2013, after the Economic and Financial Council lifted the excessive deficit procedure against Hungary. Other binding instruments used by the EU included the Horizontal Enabling Conditions, which were applied as preconditions for implementing the 2021-2027 shared management programs. Member States had to meet these conditions (including compliance with the EU Fundamental Rights Charter) to receive their share of the budget (Ibid, pp. 10-13).

According to Buyse (2018), CSOs increasingly became conceptualized as entities separate from and opposed to the state – a social space distinct from state institutions, the family, or the business world. This highlights the subordinate relationship between nation-states and their civil society. Recently, with the expansion of security-related policies and increasing discrimination, the shrinking of civic space has intensified in several states, affecting groups working on anti-discrimination issues (Negri & Pazderski, 2021). Hungary is the only country in the European Union with an obstructed civic space, as the government sanctions critical voices and restricts access to funding.[3] One of the key challenges is the 2017 Law on the 'Transparency of Foreign-Funded NGOs' (Negri & Pazderski, 2021). This has affected various NGOs, leading to surprise audits, office visits, and public debate.[4] Additionally, recent attacks on USAID-funded organizations further illustrate the government's restrictive approach.[5]

Another example is state-funded programs supporting Community Service Organizations, particularly the National Cooperation Fund (NCF), which distributed $18.3 million in 2019 (Móra et al. (2021). Upon investigation, the NCF was accused of being biased toward government-friendly organizations, with a non-user-friendly website and a lack of clear data on available grants.

Despite this, CSOs, thanks to the EC's consultation processes, can indirectly wield hierarchical power over their governments. When CSOs are obstructed by their governments, they tend to direct their lobbying efforts toward Brussels. These efforts are most apparent during conferences, events, and meetings organized by institutions such as the European Economic and Social Committee, the EC, and key donors. Other efforts include lobbying other national governments, embassies, and the public.

The hierarchical dynamics discussed here are central to understanding community-led development and monitoring in Hungarian and EU Roma policies. These power

[3] Country Profile: Hungary, Civicus, Available at: https://civicus.org/index.php/es/component/tags/tag/hungary (Accessed 02.09.2024)

[4] Note: This act was repealed following a CJEU decision.

[5] Country Profile: Hungary, Civicus, Available at: https://civicus.org/index.php/es/component/tags/tag/hungary (Accessed 02.09.2024)

structures – from national to supranational levels – shape how policies are crafted and implemented. In Hungary, restrictive national policies and top-down practices often limit effective Roma integration. As a response, civil society actors are turning to EU institutions as an alternative avenue for influence, a core focus of this paper. In summary, the literature on hierarchical power relations highlights the crucial role of both formal and informal structures in shaping policy outcomes. From domestic hierarchies that determine resource allocation to supranational hierarchies that enforce compliance through legal mechanisms, these dynamics directly impact the formulation and implementation of Roma integration policies in Hungary. Understanding these layers of authority is essential in any analysis of why community-led initiatives often find greater leverage at the EU level, providing a critical perspective on the challenges and opportunities for effective Roma policy monitoring and development.

Shrinking civic space

As briefly discussed in the previous section, the phenomenon of shrinking civic space is gaining prominence in today's political landscape. It is a key reason behind the EC's efforts to consult with local CSOs and the various funding programs (e.g., CERV, Horizon Europe) implemented by the European Union. European development efforts and policies are partially managed by CSOs to counter this shrinking space. Around 20 per cent of resources are managed by these organizations (Carbone, 2008). Another initiative to support CSOs is the Confederation of European NGOs for Relief and Development (CONCORD), established with backing from the EC. Similarly, to mobilize Roma NGOs, the European Roma Grassroots Organizations (ERGO) Network was created in Brussels to advocate alongside Roma and pro-Roma organizations across Europe.

According to the Central Statistical Office, around 61,000 NGOs were operating in Hungary in 2019, including 34,000 associations, 19,000 foundations, and 8,000 other types of organizations. Over the past five years, this number has decreased by 1,200 entities (Móra et al., 2021). The Hungarian government has actively obstructed civil society. In a speech, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stated: '*We must deal with paid political activists here. And these political activists are, moreover, political activists paid by foreigners* [...] *It is vital, therefore, that if we would like to reorganize our nation-state instead of the liberal state, we should make it clear that these are not civilians coming against us, opposing us, but political activists attempting to promote foreign interests. All of us should know who the characters behind the masks are*' (Nazarski, 2017, p. 275). This statement reflects the current political climate in Hungary. Amnesty International reported in 2017 that the Hungarian government sought to discredit, intimidate, and stigmatize critical NGOs. Under a new law, if an NGO receives over €23,000 a year in foreign funds, it must register itself as a foreign organization.

This deliberate shrinking of civic space underscores the importance of supranational mechanisms and external funding channels in preserving civil society's voice. Hierarchy is thus not only a matter of formal authority but also a tool of exclusion or inclusion. Where national structures suppress dissent, the EU and its institutional hierarchies become sites of potential resistance and empowerment for CSOs. In this context, understanding hierarchical dynamics is essential for grasping the evolving power structures surrounding Roma inclusion and broader human rights advocacy in Hungary and across Europe.

2.1 Multilevel Governance and Europeanization

This section explores how ideas about multilevel governance and Europeanization help us understand the way the EU, national governments, and other actors work together. Multilevel governance (MLG) is a way to describe how the EU really works. Unlike a normal state or a simple international organization, the EU is built on networks. Local, regional, national, and supranational bodies all interact closely, sharing responsibilities and ideas (Bache et al., 2016). In today's system, the state no longer stands alone as the sole gatekeeper between domestic and international matters. Instead, regional governments work directly with the EC, helping to implement policies and even influencing decisions through both informal discussions and formal bodies (Tortola, 2017). An important part of this process is the involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other societal actors. These groups join the conversation and help shape policies, which reflects a broader trend where the traditional lines between government, business, and civil society are becoming blurred. As Hooghe and Marks (2003) put it, authority is now shared in multiple directions – upwards, downwards, and sideways – making for a richer, though sometimes more complicated, picture of governance. While this approach offers flexibility and allows for more voices to be heard, it also comes with challenges, like coordinating efforts across different layers of government and managing unexpected effects when policies cross borders.

Europeanization is the process by which EU ideas, rules, and laws make their way into national legal systems. This can happen actively – through deliberate reforms – or passively, as countries gradually adjust to EU norms. It works through several mechanisms: countries must comply with EU law, change their own structures and opportunities, and sometimes even shift the way people think about policy (Knill & Lehmkuhl, 2002). Research shows that from Hungary's EU accession in 2004 until the 2018 elections, about 38 per cent of Hungarian laws were influenced by European regulations – a higher rate than in some other countries (Bíró-Nagy & Laki, 2022). Yet, national laws still dominate, and Hungary has struggled to fully implement EU recommendations. Despite receiving a high number of recommendations, Hungary scored low in putting them into practice. Even though the EU has shaped Hungary's legal framework, there are still significant gaps, especially when it comes to ensuring the rule of law.

Harmonization is related to Europeanization but focuses specifically on aligning national laws through EU directives. This two-step process – where the EU sets rules and then each Member State adopts them – does not always lead to uniform social policies across borders. For instance, while EU directives on non-discrimination protect vulnerable workers within each country, they do not necessarily standardize working conditions across the entire EU. This shows that true cross-border integration in social policies remains a challenge (Threlfall, 2003).Overall, the literature on multilevel governance and Europeanization paints a picture of a complex and evolving system. Although Hungary has shown a high degree of legislative Europeanization, the gap between EU expectations and domestic practices remains significant, especially in areas like rule-of-law enforcement and Roma integration. These insights are crucial as they help us understand why Hungary's policies sometimes stray from core EU values, and they set the stage for our deeper analysis of Hungary's National Strategy for Roma Integration. By considering both hierarchical and network-based processes,

the challenges and opportunities in aligning national policies with European ideals become clearer.

2.2 Applying Nancy Fraser's Justice Framework to Roma Policy Monitoring

The monitoring and evaluation of Roma policies in Hungary unfold within a complex governance structure marked by contested issues of justice, recognition, and representation. Interactions between civil society, the Hungarian government, and the EC reflect broader debates about power hierarchies and justice. Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional theory – encompassing redistribution (economic), recognition (cultural), and representation (political) – offers a critical lens to understand the structural challenges faced by Roma CSOs (Fraser, 2007).

Fraser (2007) argues that full participation requires addressing both economic and cultural injustices, often rooted in institutional hierarchies. The political dimension is central, as it defines who is included or excluded from fair distribution and recognition. Cultural injustice, manifesting as domination, disrespect, or invisibility, undermines equitable redistribution (Fraser, 2020). While recognition affirms group identities, redistribution may seek to dismantle group-based disadvantages, highlighting the potential tension between the two. To reconcile this, Fraser (2020) proposes two strategies: affirmative remedies that address outcomes without altering the root structures, and transformative remedies that aim to change those structures. Her model helps assess the (mis)representation of Roma in policy arenas and critiques the EU's liberal identity politics, which often prioritize recognition without ensuring structural change.

By applying Fraser's framework, this study analyses how Roma policy monitoring navigates the tensions between redistribution, recognition, and representation. It critiques the EU's limited mechanisms, which emphasize recognition but fall short on ensuring political inclusion and accountability. Without stronger representation, EU efforts remain insufficient for achieving substantive justice for Roma communities.

3 Hungarian and EU Roma integration politics

3.1 Hungarian National Strategy for Roma Integration (NSRI)

The integration of Roma communities has been a longstanding challenge in Europe, necessitating policy interventions at both national and transnational levels. The EU has consistently emphasized the importance of fostering Roma inclusion, given the persistent socio-economic marginalization faced by these communities. In response, various policy instruments have been developed to address Roma exclusion and discrimination.

A notable example is the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015,[6] an international effort adopted by twelve European states and supported by key organizations such as the EC, the Open Society Institute, the World Bank, the Council of Europe, UN bodies, and European Roma NGOs. This initiative provided a framework for governments to combat Roma exclusion while monitoring progress.[7] Following the conclusion of the

[6] During the initial decade, monitoring was conducted by the Decade Watch and Civil Society Reports; these were a series of assessments conducted by coalitions of actors in civil society in the countries participating in the Decade to evaluate the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies and Decade Action Plans.

[7] Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015, Roma Integration 2020, Regional Cooperation Council, Available at: https://www.rcc.int/romaintegration2020/romadecade_p/17/decade-of-roma-inclusion-2005-2015, Accessed

Decade, a consortium of states and international organizations recognized the need for continued work toward Roma integration. This resulted in the establishment of the Roma Decade of 2020, which sought to build on the feedback and lessons learned from the 2005-2015 period.[8] In parallel, in 2011, the EC called upon European states with Roma minorities to develop NSRI, outlining goals to be pursued over a ten-year period.

The EC emphasized that involving Roma communities was crucial to the strategy's success. Additionally, raising awareness among non-Roma populations and combating discrimination were central themes. The strategy addressed four key areas: education, employment, healthcare, and housing, with evaluations conducted every two years to assess progress. As a country with one of the largest Roma populations in Europe, Hungary has been a central player in the EU's Roma integration framework. The Hungarian government submitted its first NSRI in response to the EC's 2011 call, setting objectives aligned with EU priorities. The strategy aimed to enhance Roma access to education, employment, healthcare, and housing while fostering social cohesion and combating prejudice.

For the second National Strategy for Roma Integration (2021-2030), the EC recommended a series of changes and new instruments. The updated strategy expanded its focus to include seven key areas: equality, inclusion, participation, education, employment, health, and housing. For each of these areas, the EC set forth specific targets, goals, and tools to help states achieve meaningful outcomes. In Hungary's case, implementation has been accompanied by evaluations conducted by the EC, the European Fundamental Rights Agency, and CSOs. The EC required Member States to submit their revised strategies by September 2021, with reporting every two years. Additionally, an in-depth midterm evaluation will be conducted by the EC, and monitoring will be carried out by the European Fundamental Rights Agency and CSOs. Hungary submitted its updated 2021-2030 NSRI to the EC in August 2021.

3.2 Strategy critics

In 2016, the European Roma Rights Center expressed significant concerns about the effectiveness of the EU Roma Framework, declaring that it had 'hit a wall.' According to the center, half a decade after the framework's introduction, there had been no tangible improvements in the lives of Roma communities across Europe. The gap between the framework's plans and its actual implementation was perceived as wider than ever (Ryder et al., 2020). Furthermore, within the EU Roma Framework, the Roma were often portrayed not as citizens with violated rights, but as potential labor market participants with limited education. This view reduced Roma inclusion to a matter of labor market integration, while the policies themselves functioned as parallel mechanisms to those inadequately provided by the state (Schafft & Ferkovics, 2018).

Català-Oltra et al. (2021) argued that the strategy for Roma integration highlighted the limitations of a united policy within the European Union. In their evaluation of NSRIs, Bartlett et al. (2016) identified several key gaps and flaws. These included the failure to adopt an integrated and holistic methodology to address the intersectional and multi-sectoral challenges faced by Roma communities, the unclear distribution of

(04.04.2024).

[8] Decade of Roma Inclusion 2020, Roma Integration 2020, Regional Cooperation Council, Available at: https://www.rcc.int/romaintegration2020/romadecade_p/18/roma-decade-and-roma-integration-2020, Accessed (03.04.2024)

roles and responsibilities between various levels of government, and inadequate administrative capacity to address these issues. Furthermore, they pointed to the cumbersome bureaucratic processes for accessing EU funds, weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and a general lack of political will at national, sub-national, and EU levels.

Goodwin and Buijs (2013) also criticized the framework for its overemphasis on labor market participation, viewing this as the central mechanism for Roma inclusion. This focus on economic integration, they argued, framed social integration as merely a prerequisite for employment, without addressing the cultural aspects of integration. Consequently, the framework implicitly demanded that Roma conform to the majority way of life, equating integration with assimilation through the labor market, and neglecting the need to preserve and respect Roma cultural identity. This critique points to a broader issue in the EU's approach to Roma inclusion: while the frameworks and strategies are well-intentioned, their narrow focus on economic outcomes, coupled with systemic administrative and political shortcomings, has limited their effectiveness in addressing the deeper, multi-faceted challenges faced by Roma communities.

Lastly, while the EU Framework provided a new incentive for Roma integration, its top-down implementation has been met with significant criticism, particularly from Roma scholars who analyze its real-world effects. Building on the concerns of a 'soft' OMC, Rostas & Kovacs (2021) argue that the Hungarian government's implementation of the National Strategy for NSRI has been superficial. They contend that despite adopting the EU's language, the government's actions often fail to translate into meaningful change and instead reinforce existing power structures. Rostas and Kovacs (2021) highlight that the lack of genuine political will and the exclusion of authentic Roma participation in the decision-making process render the framework ineffective in tackling the deep-rooted causes of marginalization in Hungary. This perspective reinforces the argument that without bottom-up accountability and Roma-led oversight, supranational strategies risk becoming mere bureaucratic exercises.

3.3 Roma Civil Monitor

The Roma Civil Monitor (RCM) was initiated in March 2017 as a pilot project entitled Capacity Building for Roma Civil Society and Strengthening Its Involvement in the Monitoring of National Roma Integration Strategies, with a consortium of four NGOs and funded by the EC Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST), Directorate for Equality and Union Citizenship. According to Central European University, the project aims to strengthen civil society's monitoring of NSRI implementation. It seeks to enhance civil society monitoring by improving the policy-monitoring abilities of NGO actors and by preparing annual reports.

The pilot project was implemented with the participation of 90 NGOs from twenty-seven Member States. The main activities of the pilot project consisted of capacity building for the NGOs, the development of country-specific monitoring reports, data collection and analysis, the dissemination of findings, and networking between members. Following the adoption of the EU NSRI in October 2020, and with support from the EU Parliament and the EC, it was decided to continue the RCM from 2021 to 2025 with the same consortium and the support of Central European University (CEU).

4 Methodology

The study described here employed a dual-methodological approach to examine the hierarchical dynamics shaping Roma policy monitoring in Hungary. First, a meta-content analysis of both the Roma Civil Monitor and European Commission policy reports was conducted. This analysis enabled the identification of key evaluation instruments, indicators, and benchmarks used in monitoring Roma policies, offering insights into the structural mechanisms shaping policy assessments.

Second, to understand the positionality and background of these evaluations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a member of the Hungarian RCM, complemented by a qualitative questionnaire sent to EC officials.[9] These methods were designed to explore the timeline, expert involvement, policy evaluation processes, and the choice of indicators and benchmarks used in Roma policy assessments. The study also examined how institutional and political constraints at the national level influenced these evaluations.

The sampling strategy followed a judgmental (purposive) sampling method, selecting key experts directly involved in the drafting and evaluation of Roma policies. This methodological design allows for a critical examination of the governance structures and power dynamics influencing Roma inclusion policies in Hungary. It highlights the interplay between civil society, national authorities, and EU institutions, revealing the extent to which Roma CSOs can leverage EU-driven monitoring mechanisms to influence national policy.

A limitation of this study must be acknowledged: the absence of confirmed Roma participants in the interview sample. While every effort was made to solicit a broad range of expert perspectives, constraints related to institutional access and positionality inadvertently limited direct input from Roma community members. This underscores the need for future research designs that prioritize Roma-led and Roma-authored approaches to policy analysis.

5 Discussion

5.1 Methodologies and content analysis of NSRI Reports

The NSRI has been analyzed and criticized both by the EC and the CSOs in the form of the RCM. The EC report is notably concise, presenting its evaluation in a tabular format that verifies whether specific indicators and measures are present in the NSRI (a process that was conducted uniformly across all EU Member States with Roma minorities). In contrast, the RCM report offers a more comprehensive analysis, drawing on diverse indicators and benchmarks. Both documents rely on data provided by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) and the RCM, yet they differ in depth and scope.

The RCM follows a different outline, as well as different measures and criteria. Moreover, this report was referenced and included in the EC report. The Hungarian RCM report is a joint effort of a consortium of NGOs and experts from civil society. It included the policy analysis process conducted by different stakeholders and was drafted by an external consultant. The core RCM is managed by the Central European University, which directs the Hungarian RCM coalition.

[9] Table 1 in the appendix

5.2 *Advantages of the policy reports*

While the EC admits to a more hierarchical relationship with the Hungarian government, the Hungarian RCM adopts a more horizontal relationship, allowing it to openly criticize government policies and practices.

The advantage of the EC is that it is a vast institution comprising several interlocked directorates and significant financial resources. These advantages facilitate a tremendous network of connected experts, institutions, and directorates, enabling the analysis of previous NSRI strategies throughout the EU, the articulation of the Council Recommendations, and the EU Roma Strategic Framework. These latter two documents serve as the policy models and pillars for further policy analysis of any future strategy, regardless of the originating country, and are accepted by governments. Moreover, due to its reach and capacity, the EC can outsource some analyses and procedures to external expert organizations with extensive experience in the field. This, in turn, has diversified the working methods of the Commission but has also diminished transparency regarding policy analysis and the articulation of the two benchmark documents. The expertise of the EC has allowed for a formal set of tested policy analysis measures to be employed in different public and social policy areas, enhancing the credibility and power of the mechanism. Lastly, the report incorporates the findings of the FRA and the RCM, which provide a better understanding of the current metrics and indicators concerning Roma inclusion.

The main advantage of the Hungarian RCM report is its deeper understanding of the Hungarian socio-political context and its incorporation of multiple perspectives from different civil society actors. The report provides a description of the current context of the Hungarian government from both political and sociological perspectives. Moreover, the RCM mechanism itself adopts an academic approach to public policy analysis and sociology, enabling well-researched and personalized guidelines and methodologies. The report was created by Phiren Amenca, which emphasizes Roma representation in the decision-making process. The consortium consisted of eight CSOs with deep expertise in the field. The positionality of the Hungarian RCM allowed for a more critical and thorough analysis of the strategy and included several testimonies from CSOs.

Both reports relied heavily on the Council Recommendations and the EU Roma Strategic Framework as policy models, comparing and analyzing the strategy according to these documents.

5.3 *Limitations of the policy reports*

Policy analysis can be conducted through top-down and/or bottom-up approaches. The positionality and discourse of the experts behind the reports should also be taken into consideration. According to Vogel (2016), 'cultural insensitivity, a disregard of traditions, norms, customs, and a general blindness to the local context are responsible for the failure of international attempts to foster peace.'

The disadvantage of the EC report is that it did not involve a more personalized approach to the Hungarian context. As a result, the report lacked the nuanced, context-specific recommendations seen in the RCM report. The mechanism has established certain processes, measures, and methodologies that were applied uniformly across all European countries, resulting in a structured report that did not reflect the Hungarian context. As such, the EC report, unlike the RCM report, was not personalized

in its use of the policy model and in its recommendations. In light of recent events, the EC has articulated recommendations to improve the strategy to some extent; however, it does not seem to have leveraged this to push for deeper action and more enhanced policies from the Hungarian government. Analyses of specific policy principles within the EU Framework support this critique of the EC's generalized approach. For example, the principle of Mainstreaming, Social Inclusion, and Gender Equality (MSG) is central to the strategy, yet its application in Hungary has been questioned by Roma policy experts. Mainstreaming has often resulted in the government avoiding targeted, effective interventions for Roma communities. Instead of embedding Roma inclusion across all policy sectors, the government uses the concept of 'mainstreaming' to justify a lack of specific, funded programs, ultimately making accountability more difficult. This failure illustrates a broader pattern in which the EU framework's tools, without rigorous and context-sensitive enforcement, can be used to legitimize inaction at the national level. Last, regarding wording, the EC report did not provide concrete definitions for important terms or clarify its understanding of empowerment and inclusion.

The limitation of the Hungarian RCM is that it was not institutionalized enough. Consortium coordination was nearly nonexistent, which limited the active participation and contributions of the members. The report was produced as a last-minute effort, leaving little room for in-depth consultation or capacity building among consortium members. The Hungarian RCM was not adequately monitored by the CEU RCM, causing delays in activities and resulting in a last-minute report. This did not allow consortium members to provide thorough feedback. Moreover, the project activities and the policy analysis guidelines and methods were not communicated to consortium members, as the lead single-handedly opted to contract an external expert to create and draft the report. The Hungarian RCM report and project did not facilitate concrete capacity building for consortium members in policy analysis and did not clarify the division of tasks among them. This apparent lack of transparency between the lead and consortium members diminished the potential of such a coalition. Furthermore, in terms of policy analysis by NGOs, it appears that there was no formal policy analysis process in place, and the policy process employed during the previous RCM report was not utilized. Finally, interviews were conducted with three government officers, and their input was included in the report. However, there was no mention of the possibility of bias or dishonest answers; public officers tend to communicate politically or manipulate facts.

Nancy Fraser's (2000) concept of justice as both redistribution and recognition is particularly relevant here. Monitoring policies is not just about tracking outcomes or assessing efficiency – it is also about examining whether the voices of marginalized groups are genuinely recognized and whether they have real opportunities to shape policy decisions. When public consultations are last-minute or symbolic, and when civil society's input is dismissed or diluted, the entire monitoring process risks becoming a performative exercise. Thus, while the EU's Roma integration framework presents itself as participatory, in practice it often fails to deliver on its democratic promise. Formal inclusion does not always translate into meaningful influence. If monitoring tools like the RCM are to support genuine progress, they must go beyond procedural participation and address the underlying power asymmetries that prevent Roma communities and their advocates from being full partners in shaping their futures.

5.4 The role of civil society in policy

The Hungarian government was the first state to submit its strategy to the EC. The EC's potential is significant when it comes to advocating for policies. The feedback provided by the report prompted the Hungarian government to consult with civil society. As a member of Autonomia stated, 'Due to the report, it might happen that the Hungarian government will not receive money from the EU for Roma integration. Moreover, half a year after the report, the government organized a consultation meeting with critical government NGOs, which shows the pressure that the report has put on them. There is very slow development.'[10]

Additionally: 'The Hungarian governmental officers knew about the RCM report and were aware of the two-year-old analysis (articulated by civil society about the draft strategy during the consultation). As such, they knew about the criticisms and the opinions. They did not understand the weight of it, and it grew like a wave, evolving into significant criticism from the EC side, which amplified our voice.' [11] The Hungarian RCM report is an important policy analysis document that was included at the EU level in the EC report. This feedback loop underscores how civil society efforts, despite being limited, can eventually influence policy at the EU level.

It is not that the Hungarian government did not consult CSOs about the strategy; rather, it did so in an unorthodox manner. The draft strategy was sent to 11 CSOs during the Christmas period with a 10-day deadline. The CSOs quickly mobilized to provide urgent feedback to the government. Later, the government published the same draft strategy without any modifications, which shows that while there technically was a consultation, it was not meaningful. Similar instances were highlighted by Móra et al. (2021), such as when the government asked the trade union to submit comments on a bill over the Easter holidays (April 9 to April 14), or the research institute network of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences receiving a draft with only hours to provide an opinion on it. Such practices illustrate a tokenistic approach to public participation that fails to provide genuine opportunities for input.

5.5 Influence of hierarchical structures

Until August 2023, around twenty-two thousand infringement processes had been launched, of which 716 were against Hungary (Gulácsi & Kerényi, 2023). In 2022, after various attempts and reports on the decline of democracy in Hungary, the European Union activated the rule of law conditionality regulation to protect the Union's budget. Using the horizontal enabling conditions, the EC suspended Hungary's access to European Union funds, and the European Court of Justice dismissed Hungary's annulment action, which is not subject to appeal (Rutherford, 2023). This opened the way for the European Union to act aggressively against Hungary, along with Poland, the two largest net recipients of EU funds.

Following this, the government initiated remedial procedures to restore the rule of law, which the Commission did not judge to be in compliance with the requirements. In November 2022, it suggested suspending funding for 65 per cent of three programs associated with the 2021-2027 budget cycle (Gulácsi & Kerényi, 2023). These enforcement actions underscore how supranational hierarchical mechanisms can directly influence national policy implementation.

[10] Interview with the director of Autonomia Foundation (20.03.2023).
[11] Interview with the director of Autonomia Foundation (20.03.2023).

On the other hand, the hierarchical relationship between the Hungarian government and NGOs remains as unstable as ever. In addition to the laws and the previously discussed shrinking of civil society, there is no national-level support, while the government is disabling access to even international funds. The latest scandal concerns the Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway funds, where Hungary did not reach an agreement. €214.6 million in funding from the EEA and Norway Grants was supposed to be allocated to Hungary. The signed Memoranda of Understanding included a section asserting that no programs could be accepted until an autonomous fund operator for civil society funding had been selected. However, the donors and the Hungarian government did not reach an agreement on a Fund Operator by the deadline, resulting in Hungary losing access to the funds, along with independent CSOs. This incident reflects ongoing tensions and underscores how hierarchical power dynamics at the national level can jeopardize the financial support available to independent CSOs.[12]

The EC established forums, committees, boards, and intergovernmental and transnational networks to engage in informal practices and agreements. One of these forums is notably the Roma Week, organized annually around April. This space allows for informal and formal exchanges between civil society and decision-makers. These examples have served as a self-legitimation strategy for the EC, as it aims to appear as a competent representative of European concerns that considers societal interests from the bottom up (Steffek, 2014). The *White Paper on European Governance* (2001) and the *General Principles and Minimum Standards for the Consultation of Interested Parties* (2002) attest to these efforts.

This discussion section ties directly into the paper's broader examination of how hierarchical dynamics and multilevel governance structures influence Roma integration policies. By critically analyzing both the strengths and limitations of policy reports (NSRI, EC, and RCM) and evaluating the role of civil society in policy monitoring, the complex interplay between local and supranational forces in this specific context became clearer. These insights are pivotal for understanding why Roma CSOs increasingly turn to EU institutions for advocacy and how these power dynamics affect policy implementation in Hungary.

6 Conclusion

This paper has explored the intricate dynamics between Roma civil society, Hungarian government policy, and EU mechanisms, particularly through the lens of the Hungarian NSRI. The analysis of the EC's and RCM reports highlights significant gaps in both the policies and their implementation. Our findings reveal that while the EU has demonstrated a commitment to Roma inclusion via frameworks such as the OMC, this commitment is undermined by its soft governance nature, which leaves critical decisions to national political will.

The findings emphasize the limitations of the OMC as a 'soft' governance tool. While it encourages Member States to adopt inclusive strategies, the lack of binding mechanisms and deference to national political will undermine its effectiveness. As argued by Matache (2017), Hungary's policies towards Roma integration often reinforce existing power imbalances and fail to tackle the root causes of antigypsyism. These limitations are compounded by the Hungarian government's reluctance to adopt targeted measures or address the societal structures that perpetuate Roma exclusion.

[12] This incident deeply affected the funding of independent Roma and Pro-Roma civil society organizations.

Both the EC and RCM have played crucial roles in monitoring the NSRI, yet their differing approaches reveal a tension between maintaining diplomatic relations with the Hungarian government and confronting deeper systemic issues. The RCM's more critical stance provided a clearer reflection of the Hungarian context, offering an honest critique of the government's failure to implement meaningful Roma inclusion measures. However, internal challenges within the RCM report drafting process, such as limited transparency and rushed timelines, have constrained its impact.

Moreover, our discussion of hierarchical power relations, multilevel governance, and Europeanization has shown that the effectiveness of policy monitoring is deeply intertwined with the broader socio-political landscape. Moving forward, achieving genuine Roma inclusion in Hungary and across the EU will require more than mere monitoring and soft recommendations. There is a pressing need for both EU and national policymakers to revisit and strengthen accountability measures – potentially through enforceable tools like the Race Equality Directive – while also adopting a more comprehensive, culturally sensitive approach that includes non-Roma populations in the dialogue.

Fraser's three-dimensional theory of justice – redistribution, recognition, and representation – offers a critical lens to interpret these findings. EU policies often emphasize cultural recognition without adequately addressing economic redistribution or political representation. This imbalance weakens transformative potential and perpetuates structural injustice. As Fraser (2020) notes, without addressing the institutional roots of inequality, affirmative measures risk becoming symbolic rather than structural. Roma CSOs continue to face representational misrecognition in policy arenas, and their potential to influence remains underutilized within this multilevel governance system.

Moving forward requires more than monitoring and soft recommendations. The EU must strengthen its commitment to Roma inclusion by revisiting its reliance on the OMC and considering more enforceable measures, such as the Race Equality Directive. Additionally, both EU and national policies must adopt a more comprehensive approach that includes non-Roma populations and focuses on dismantling the institutional frameworks behind antigypsyism. This will necessitate deeper involvement from Roma communities and civil society in the policymaking process, as well as a cultural shift in how Roma identity, arts, and history are integrated into these strategies.

Ultimately, achieving Roma inclusion in Hungary and across the EU requires a combination of top-down and bottom-up initiatives informed by both policy evaluation and community participation. Policymakers must embrace a more redistributive and egalitarian discourse that addresses not only the immediate material needs of the Roma but also challenges the broader structures perpetuating their marginalization. Civil society organizations can influence Hungarian public policy through a top-down approach. Through navigating hierarchical relationships, local monitoring, and advocacy in Brussels, community-led development remains possible even within the constraints of Hungary's shrinking civic space.

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KARUNANITHI GOPALAKRISHNAN*

A caste group located on the lowest rung of the social hierarchy in India: Dalits in the past and present

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Abstract

This paper discusses the situation of Dalit communities in India in the past and present, highlighting their problems and challenges against the backdrop of the caste system. It examines specific features of the caste system as presented by scholars within and outside India and discusses the concept of untouchability. It also considers Dalit movements and their role in awakening Dalit consciousness and driving political mobilisation through national and regional political parties to gain access to power. It focuses on constitutional provisions to safeguard their rights and interests, as well as on government-led affirmative action that provides opportunities to improve their educational and employment status. It relies solely on a literature review as the methodological approach and uses an explanatory research design. It concludes that the caste system cannot be eradicated from Indian society, and hence social (caste) hierarchy will continue to exist in one form or another along with the related phenomena –caste-based discrimination and social inequality.

Keywords: *Social hierarchy, Varna, Jati, Caste, Dalit, Untouchability.*

1 Introduction

This review paper aims to discuss the relationship between social (caste) hierarchy and the plight of Dalits to understand the roots of untouchability. It examines the situation of Dalits in the past and in India today, in general and in Tamil Nadu in particular. It presents their key problems and deals with the role of Dalit movements in awakening their consciousness to accelerate their political mobilisation. It dwells on constitutional provisions aimed at safeguarding their rights and interests, besides providing opportunities through affirmative action to promote their educational and employment status.

While preparing the paper, an exploratory research design[1] was applied. The topic is confined to Dalit issues with reference to Tamil Nadu as a case in point for the discussion. This is mainly due to the researcher's choice, as he has adequate knowledge of the caste system in his native state, Tamil Nadu. The systematic review of relevant literature, an important methodological approach, was undertaken to collect the required information to support and facilitate the discussions in the paper. In addition, the historical method was used to facilitate the discussion of the background of social (caste) hierarchy under the *varna* System and the caste system in later Indian society, and its

[1] An exploratory research design is used in this paper to identify, explore and describe the existing social phenomena (caste system and its related factors) in Indian society.

resultant phenomenon, viz. untouchability. In addition, the comparative method was used to compare the situation of Dalits in the past and in the present. However, the paper limits its scope to discussing the social (caste) hierarchy, problems Dalits face, their political mobilisation by Dalit movements, and their education and employment situation in contemporary India.

2 Conceptual overview

Social hierarchy in India takes the form of a caste hierarchy based on one's birth and social status. Various castes are hierarchically ranked in accordance with their social status, and the Dalits have been placed on the lowest rung as they have been considered polluted and treated as untouchables. The social hierarchy in ancient India was based on the *varna* System, understood as a form of social division.

Wietmarschen (2021) observed that people are often embedded in hierarchically ordered social relationships. Likewise, Blader & Chen (2014) stated that people are positioned in the social hierarchy based on factors such as socioeconomic status, power, dominance, prestige, influence, and leadership. Thus, a social hierarchy ranks individuals or groups primarily by economic factors (wealth), political access (power), and prestige (social status). Similarly, Magee & Galinsky (2008) indicated that status and power are distinct bases of social hierarchies. Mazur (1985) noted that individuals' positions within social hierarchies consistently shape the extent of their social influence and access to group resources. For Lake (2009), a social hierarchy is a form of social differentiation or social stratification associated with differences in authority over others.

Social hierarchies in any society are conventionally believed to provide functional benefits, sustaining social order and promoting coordination and collective action. Similarly, Redhead & Power (2022) observed that social hierarchies may have emerged as a near-universal form of social organisation to provide functional benefits in coordination and collective action. Mintzberg (1979) stated that as groups and organisations grow, their work becomes more complex, and they tend to formalise their hierarchies. Dubreuil (2010) noted that social hierarchies vary across cultures.

Primarily, India is a hierarchical society. Sorokin (1962) observed that the social structure of India has been based on hierarchically superposed divisions, i.e., upper and lower layers on the social ladder. People in India were differentiated by the unequal distribution of rights and privileges, duties and responsibilities, and customs and rules. Morton Klass (1993) pointed out that social hierarchy and occupational ranking in India determined the distribution of resources unequally among various caste groups. Thus, it is evident that the social hierarchy has led to the caste system, which eventually resulted in unequal access to resources and opportunities.

Unlike other world societies, the Vedic society[2] of India was based on a hierarchically ordered *varna* system, and later replaced by the caste system. Therefore, this paper may serve as a source for social scientists in other countries, including Europe, to understand the typical social hierarchy in Indian society and its impact on Dalits. Hence, it is important to discuss the concepts of *varna* and *caste*, which form the foundation of Indian society's social hierarchy and structure.

Varna, a Sanskrit word, literally means 'colour' and its contextual meaning is 'at-

[2] According to the World History Encyclopaedia, Vedic society spanned c. 1500 BCE - c.500 BCE.

tributes' (Dwivedi, 2018). The *Purushasukta,* a hymn of the Rigveda (10. 90. 13),[3] discloses that the universe was created from different parts of the body of *Purusha*[4] when his body was offered as the primordial sacrifice. The four *varnas* emanated from the sacrifice of *Purusha*: the priestly division (*Brahmins*) from his mouth, the warrior division (*Kshatriyas*) from his arms, the peasant division (*Vaishyas*) from his thighs, and the serving division (*Shudras*) from his feet. The *Brahmins* were declared to be superior because they were created from his mouth. Hence, their major duty was to study and teach the Vedas. The *Kshatriyas* were created from his arms, and their major duty was to protect people. The *Vaishyas* were created from his stomach, and their major duty was to cultivate. The *Shudras* were created from his feet and, therefore, serve all three *varnas*. With respect to this hierarchical order, Ghurye (1969) observed that there is no direct interpretation found in the hymns of the Rigveda. But he ascribed that the order in which the four *varnas* were placed probably indicates the social status of that point in time.

Apart from the fourfold classification of the varna system, yet another *varna*, viz. *Panchamas* (meaning 'fifth' in Sanskrit), was identified. They existed outside this system but were placed on the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. They were otherwise known as depressed-caste people or outcastes or untouchables, commonly known as 'Dalits' (Ayyar & Khandare, 2013). 'Caste', an English word, is equivalent to the Sanskrit word, *Jati*, which comes from the root word, *Jan*, which means 'to beget' or 'to produce'. Jati is the social stratum in which one is born. In other words, one is fixed in this stratum based on one's birth. This means of placing Hindus on different rungs of the social hierarchy has remained a divisive factor since the Vedic period. It can be traced back to Manu (*Manusmriti*, 10. 44), who claims that different *jatis* emerged from the intermixture of the four *varnas*. On the other hand, caste derives from the Portuguese word *casta*, meaning 'race, lineage, tribe or breed'. Like *jati*, Sarma (2022) observed, castes seem to have originated from intermarriages among the four *varnas*.

The Hindu social structure in the form of caste hierarchy breeds inequality and nurtures the caste system along with an attendant practice, namely, untouchability. Thorat and Joshi (2020) estimated that contemporary India has about 3,000 castes. Definitions and explanations of the caste system by scholars within and outside India clearly identify specific features such as homogeneity, hierarchy, endogamy, heredity, and traditional occupation. Blunt (1931) pointed out that it refers to endogamous units, and membership is based on birth alone. One's position in the social hierarchy is invariably decided by his birth. While analysing the caste system in India, Bailey (1933) identified three characteristic features of this system: rigidity, purity–pollution, and ranking. The social hierarchy is maintained through the belief in and practice of purity (ritual cleanliness) and pollution, upholding the claim of superiority by the higher-caste groups over the lower-caste groups. Particularly, endogamy, heredity, and traditional occupation are important features of the caste system, according to scholars such as Srinivas (1962), Gough (1969), Marriott (1969), Mayer (1973), and Betellie (1965). Ghurye (1969)'s presentation of the features of the caste system includes almost all the features pointed out by these scholars. According to him, features such as one's occupation and social status are decided by one's birth into a caste;

[3] According to the World History Encyclopaedia, the Rigveda is the oldest Indian text, most likely written between c.1500 and 1100 BCE. It is one of the four Vedas (Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda), which are the ancient and sacred scriptures of the Hindus.

[4] According to the Rigveda, Purusha is the primaeval being from whose body the universe was created.

marriage is decided by the norms of caste endogamy; social intercourse is decided by caste position in the social (caste) hierarchy; and food is differentiated by its preparation with water or ghee.

3 Untouchability

The term 'untouchability' probably came into vogue during the colonial period mainly to legitimise discriminatory practices against the Dalits in India. Galanter (1969, p. 139) observed that: "....The English term 'untouchability' is of relatively recent coinage; its first appearance in print was in 1909..." Further, he wrote: "A ... somewhat narrower sense of the term would include all instances in which a person was stigmatised as unclean or polluting or inferior because of his origin or membership in a particular group – i.e., where he is subjected to invidious treatment because of difference in religion or membership of a lower or different caste". While referring to the concept of untouchability, Shah (2007) pointed out that the notion of 'purity and pollution' has played a crucial role in separating one caste from another, and in arranging them in a hierarchy, which forms the basic structure of Indian society and enforces discriminative practices against people born into particular castes.

The concept of purity–pollution associated with the caste system is explained by Dube (1956) and Dumont (1958). Here, purity refers to ritual purity, whereas pollution means uncleanliness. In other words, the dichotomy of purity and pollution reflects the belief that the rituals of higher castes are purer than those of lower castes. In relation to this, Shaw (2007, p. 356) wrote: "The Hindu civilization is sometimes called a civilization of purity and pollution, and the Hindu psyche is believed to be pathologically obsessed with them". For instance, depressed-caste people (Dalits), who were treated as untouchables because they were considered polluted, have been denied the right of mixing with Caste-Hindus.[5] If they did so, or even if their shadows happened to fall on the Caste-Hindus, the latter were deemed to have been polluted. To get rid of this pollution, the latter had to perform a series of cleansing rituals. Though this act of ablution is only in vogue mostly among orthodox *Brahmins*, untouchability continues to exist.

The Constitution of India identified several untouchable castes and included them in a schedule known as 'Scheduled Castes' (SCs). According to the 75th Round National Sample Survey of India (2017–2018), Dalits made up about 17 per cent of India's population. It is surprising to see the further prevalence of caste discrimination and untouchability amongst the several unequal subdivisions of Dalits. For instance, Pandian's (2013) paper on the inner reservation of *Arunthathiyars* (cobblers) confirmed this. It has been observed in Tamil Nadu State that the *Arunthathiyars* are considered to have a lower status than all other SCs and hence, in rural areas of the state, even today they are not allowed to live in the quarters occupied by other SC groups. This is in a way an example of untouchability even among the untouchables.

4 Dalits

In the late 1880s, the term 'Dalit' was used by Jyotirao Phule, an anti-caste social reformer in India. The root word of Dalit is *dalita* (a Sanskrit word), meaning 'broken,

[5] The term 'Caste-Hindus' refers to Hindus belonging to various castes placed in the caste hierarchy, except the segregated and oppressed caste people known as Dalits.

scattered, or oppressed'. Later, this word was adopted into Hindi and Marathi, where it came to mean 'downtrodden' or 'oppressed'. It is used to refer to the marginalised communities historically labelled as 'untouchables' in India. B.R. Ambedkar called them 'Dalits', whereas M. K. Gandhi called them 'Harijans', meaning 'Children of God'. Although their aims regarding overcoming untouchability were the same, their strategies to eradicate it differed. Gandhi wanted to abolish it while retaining the *varna* system and the caste system, but Ambedkar sought to eliminate the caste system entirely, which he saw as the root of untouchability.

During the period of colonial rule in India, the proportion of the 'Depressed Classes' ranged from 13 to 15 per cent according to the Census of India, 1931 and 1941, but this had risen to 16.6 per cent by the time of the Census of India 2011. All over India, including Tamil Nadu, members of these classes are the most backward economically, educationally and socially. Most of them are illiterate and landless agricultural workers, and a sizable proportion of them are bonded workers. Concerning jobs other than agricultural work, Iversen (2011) states that they are typically engaged in menial and odd jobs such as cremating dead bodies, removing and skinning dead cattle, and manual scavenging. These are considered defiling jobs and believed to pollute other caste groups physically and ritually. Therefore, they are forced to live on the outskirts of villages, whereas other Caste-Hindus settled in different quarters of villages according to their positions in the caste hierarchy. In support of this claim, Mines (2009) has pointed out that Dalits were not allowed to live within the quarters of Caste-Hindus due to the risk of pollution. This spatial segregation in rural areas continues in most states in India, including Tamil Nadu, but it is rarely found in urban areas.

The problem of the oppression of the Dalits by the Caste-Hindus was acute in pre–independence India. They were deprived of basic human rights and a decent living. Because they were denied the right to education, their unemployment rate was very high, as Sooryamoorthy (2008) points out. Moreover, they were denied access to basic amenities such as drinking water, housing, clothing, health, education, and the like, as well as access to public places such as roads, temples, markets, hotels, clubs, crematoriums, etc. Even after Independence, the Dalits in India were unable to exercise many of their civil rights and were subjected to continued discrimination and atrocities at the hands of Caste-Hindus. At one point, this led to conversions in several states of India to other faiths such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism.

For instance, the conversion of *Mahars* (a major Dalit community in Maharashtra State, India) to Buddhism was part of a major socio-religious movement led by Ambedkar in 1956 in protest against the oppressive caste-system and its inherent discrimination. Gail Omvedt (2003) stated that after Ambedkar's mass conversion ceremony in Nagpur, Maharashtra State, on October 14, 1956, nearly half a million *Mahars* embraced Buddhism and began following this faith as a path to social emancipation from the stigma of untouchability. Similarly, in the 1980s, the conversion of Dalits to Islam took place in certain parts of Tamil Nadu mainly to escape caste-based oppression. For example, in 1981, a mass religious conversion of the Dalits to Islam took place in a village in the Tirunelveli District of Southern Tamil Nadu due to repeated atrocities done to them by Caste-Hindus. Mathew (1982) disclosed that this conversion was mainly due to the prevalence of caste discrimination and economic marginalisation rooted deeply in the hierarchical structure of the caste system. In 2022, forty individuals from eight Dalit families in a village in Southern Tamil Nadu embraced Islam due to their stressful living conditions caused by the upper–caste Hindus (Sreedevi, 2022).

Similar incidents have taken place in different parts of India for similar reasons. Thus, conversion has become a stratagem through which the Dalits seek a paradigm shift from ascribed identity to achieved identity. However, despite their change of faith, they are still labelled 'Dalit Muslims' and 'Dalit Christians'.

All over India, the conversion of Dalits to other faiths has removed the social stigma of untouchability appreciably and reduced caste–based discrimination considerably. Unlike with Islam, Christianity in India has not done away with untouchability with respect to Dalit converts. This stigma remains prevalent in church-related activities. Such individuals still experience caste–based discrimination within the church, including segregated burial grounds, separate funeral carts, and exclusion from church leadership positions. For instance, a study by Aruldoss (1992) found that untouchability exists in different forms, mainly in Roman Catholic Churches in Tamil Nadu. Further, *The News Minute Staff* (2025) reported on caste–based discrimination among converts. Thus, it is evident that the caste system remains a powerful social institution that cuts across faiths and sustains untouchability and caste discrimination.

5 The plight of the Dalits: past and present

In colonial India, the Dalits were subjected to a series of disadvantages relating to the social, economic, educational, religious and political spheres. Ghurye (1969)'s observations on the characteristic features of the caste system show the plight of Dalits in colonial and post-colonial India. From his observations, it is clear that restrictions were imposed on various aspects of their lives, as presented in the following section.

5.1 Denial of social intercourse

One of the serious disadvantages of the Dalits in India was the restriction on social intercourse. All over India, they had to keep themselves away from the Caste-Hindus to avoid their pollution. In pre-Independence times, this problem was rampant, particularly in Kerala State in South India. Thurston (1975) stated that, in this state, the perception of pollution prevailed in two forms: 'untouchability' and 'inapproachability' or 'unseeability'. The first involved Dalits avoiding touching upper-caste Hindus, and the second involved keeping themselves at a distance from them. The practice of 'unseeability' was also in vogue at the same time. But these practices are no longer observed. As regards Tamil Nadu and other states, after the introduction of the Untouchability Offences Act, 1955, this stigma slowly disappeared to outward appearances but left some bitterness amongst upper-caste Hindus.

5.2 Denial of civil rights

Since the untouchables in colonial India were treated as subhuman and considered unworthy of any rights and privileges, they faced a series of civil disadvantages. For instance, they were not allowed to enter temples and other sacred places in the quarters of Caste-Hindus. They were denied access to education and basic amenities in those quarters. Hence, according to Thorat (2002), the isolation and exclusion of untouchables were unique features of India's social hierarchy. Further, over centuries, many Dalit women and girls in India, especially agricultural workers, have been subjected to different forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation by the Caste-Hindu landowners.

Since the Dalits were denied the right to education, they remained dependent workers living at the mercy of upper-caste landowners who exploited their labour for a meagre wage. In many parts of India, they faced threats and harassment when they raised their voices against the discrepancy between their work and their wages. For instance, on December 25, 1968, a shocking incident happened in a village on the east coast of Tamil Nadu. In this village, a group of 44 Dalits consisting of five male and sixteen female agricultural workers, and 23 children were burnt alive while sleeping in their huts during nighttime. The upper-caste landowners of the village conspired to perpetrate this mass killing by making use of their henchmen because the Dalit agricultural workers had demanded a minimum wage for their work (Nithila, 2014).

In rural India, the Dalits were denied equal opportunities and protection. For example, in Tamil Nadu, due to their plan to participate in public elections, they were threatened and beaten by the Caste-Hindus. Sometimes the Caste-Hindus snatched away their voting rights by force. While contesting official positions in local governments, they have been intimidated by the Caste-Hindus, who have used physical violence to encourage them to withdraw their nominations. For instance, in September 1996, a village in southern Tamil Nadu was reserved for SC candidates to contest the panchayat election. After facing a series of problems, including death threats, two Dalit candidates were elected to the positions of president and vice-president in December 1996 despite the election boycott by the Caste-Hindus. Since the president was prevented by the Caste-Hindus from entering the panchayat office and subjected to death threats, he appealed to the Government of Tamil Nadu State and obtained armed security to enable him to execute his official work. After some months, while travelling in a bus with four aides, the president and vice-president were hacked to death along with their aides by a group of Caste-Hindus. This gruesome murder sparked alarming communal violence in and around the village (Ranjani, 2023). Caste discrimination against the Dalits was also noted even at the time of the devastation caused by the tsunami along the Indian coast of Tamil Nadu in 2004. For instance, in different phases of tsunami recovery, Dalits were denied provisions and relief materials (Gill, 2006). Moreover, untouchability was still being practised then, mostly in the southernmost areas of Tamil Nadu severely affected by tsunami (Karunanithi, 2005).

5.3 Denial of religious rights

In some parts of India, Dalits have organised protests to secure their right to enter temples. Importantly, Ambedkar led a protest outside the *Kalaram* temple in Nasik city, Maharashtra State, on 2 March 1930, demanding that Dalits be allowed to enter the temple (Malik, 2022). In rural India, the Dalits are typically denied the right to enter temples situated in the quarters of Caste-Hindus. For instance, in a village in Northern Tamil Nadu, one section of the Caste-Hindus continued to prevent the Dalits from entering a common village temple because the former believed that their entry would not only defile the deity but also pollute the entire premises. Consequently, under a court order, the temple was sealed at one point and later reopened for worship by both communities (The Hindu, April 18, 2025). But the uncompromising Caste-Hindus opposed the temple entry of Dalits, besides making derogatory slurs against them. Immediately, the police contingent brought the situation under control by dispersing the rival groups. However, this inter-caste tension will remain unchanged as long as the Caste-Hindus continue to discriminate against the Dalits.

5.4 Denial of occupational mobility

NITI Aayog's[6] 2023 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) showed that, in India, 27.4 per cent of Dalits were multidimensionally poor, compared with 11.28 per cent of the overall population. However, in Tamil Nadu, their poverty rate was 30.5 per cent in 2011, compared with the State's overall rate of 19.7 per cent. A key factor contributing to their poverty is their occupational structure. Since time immemorial, caste groups' occupations have been fixed hereditarily and hierarchically. This occupational hierarchy became a rule for all caste groups, with jobs assigned according to their position in the caste hierarchy. People's caste identities were made public mostly through hereditary occupations passed down from generation to generation. Within this order, the Dalits were clustered in the least-well-paid, degrading occupations such as sweeping, scavenging and the like. Until the mid–twentieth century, higher-caste groups maintained their occupational supremacy and did not allow other caste groups to follow their occupations. Venkateswarlu (1990) found that when the Dalits in Andhra Pradesh, a South Indian State, tried to change their traditional occupation, they were subjected to oral and physical punishment. Similarly, Dalit workers were excluded from house construction activities because of their perceived pollution (Thorat, 2009). But after the introduction of the Reservation Policy in 1950, Dalits' occupational mobility began to increase through education.

5.5 Caste–based endogamy

Endogamy, an essential feature of the caste system, continues to be a norm amongst the Hindus. In the past, mostly in villages, those who married outside their caste groups were excommunicated along with their families. However, the 2011 census reports that 5.8 per cent of the marriages in India were inter-caste marriages. Most of the inter-caste 'love marriages' between the Dalits and members of other caste groups, especially in Tamil Nadu, have resulted in inter-caste conflict and sometimes fatalities, leading to loss of property and human life on both sides. According to the 2021 report *Crime in India* published by the National Crime Records Bureau, the highest number of murders due to romantic relationships happened in the Indian States of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Gujarat (Crime in India, 2021).

In Tamil Nadu state, Dalit men often face threats for marrying women from other caste groups. In support of this claim, Shaji and Kumaran (2012) describe a serious incident in a village in northern Tamil Nadu. According to police, a teenage Caste-Hindu girl eloped with a Dalit boy and got married clandestinely in a temple. Since the Caste-Hindus in the village warned the couple that they should separate, the former approached a local senior police officer for protection. Despite his intervention, many Caste-Hindus collectively warned the boy's parents to send the girl back to her home. However, the girl refused to leave her husband and made it clear that she wanted to live with him. In anticipation of alarming violence between the two caste groups, about 300 police personnel were deployed to the tension-prone part of the village. Being unable to control the dreadfully violent mob of Caste-Hindus, the latter looted valuable things from several Dalits' homes before setting fire to more than 140 homes.

[6] NITI Aayog (National Institution for Transforming India) is India's premier policy think tank and a non-constitutional body, established on January 1, 2015, to replace the Planning Commission.

6 Legal measures and affirmative action

6.1 Legal measures

After Independence, the Indian Constitution abolished untouchability through laws. In particular, the Untouchability (Offences) Act[7] has appreciably reduced the discrimination and atrocities Dalits suffer. According to this Constitution, 'the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, place and birth or any of them'. Thorat (2002, p. 572) noted that, along with the constitutional provisions, the Government of India has initiated several protective and developmental measures, as follows.

In the 'protective sphere' untouchability was legally abolished and its practice in any form forbidden by the Anti-Untouchability Act of 1955. Nearly two decades later, in 1976, the 1955 Act was reviewed in order to make it more stringent and effective, and the 'Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955' (PCR Act) was enacted. In 1989, the government enacted yet another Act, namely the Scheduled Castes/Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act, in order to prevent atrocities against members of the SC/ST. The need for this additional act was felt because under the circumstances, PCR 1955 and the normal provisions of the Indian Penal Code had been found to be inadequate to provide safeguards to SC/ST against several crimes.

These legal measures, along with affirmative action facilitated by modern democratic values, may mitigate the impact of the caste system on people's lives and ameliorate untouchability in rural India.

6.2 Affirmative action: Reservation Policy

Presently, Dalit politics largely focuses on affirmative action to obtain benefits in education, employment, and electoral representation granted by the Constitution of India. An important example of such affirmative action taken by the Government of India for the SCs is the 'Reservation Policy'.[8] This policy applies to education and employment. Until India's independence in 1947, Dalits were denied access to education and therefore could not enter the employment market, remaining mostly labourers in the agricultural sector. After the introduction of the Reservation Policy in 1950, they gained access to educational institutions.

The literacy rate of SCs has been lower than India's overall literacy rate. In 1961, SC literacy was 10.27 per cent, compared with India's total literacy (28.31 per cent). After 50 years, by 2011, SC literacy increased to 66.07 per cent, compared with India's total literacy rate (72.98 per cent). The following table (Table 1) presents the details.

Among the SC population, men's literacy rate was higher than women's. The former rose from 66.6 per cent in 2001 to 75.2 per cent in 2011, while the latter rose from about 42 per cent in 2001 to 56.5 per cent in 2011 (Census Report, 2011). This is shown in the following Table (Table 2).

However, with respect to the total population of India, there was a decline in the gender gap from 24.8 per cent in 1991 to 21.6 per cent in 2001, and to 16.2 per cent in

[7] The Untouchability (Offences) Act, which prescribes punishments for the practice of untouchability and abolishes this practice, came into force on 1 June 1955.

[8] India's Reservation Policy, an affirmative action policy, provides representation to marginalised communities, primarily Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in education, government jobs, and the legislature. Accordingly, the percentage–based quotas are as follows: Scheduled Castes (15 per cent), Scheduled Tribes (7.5 per cent), Other Backwards Classes (27 per cent), a 10 per cent quota for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), and provisions for ex-servicemen and people with disabilities.

Table 1 Literacy Rate of Scheduled Castes and Total Literacy Rate of India

Year	Literacy Rate (%)	
	SCs	All India
1961	10.27	28.31
2011	66.07	72.98

Source. Census of India 1961 & 2011

Table 2 Literacy Rate of Scheduled Castes by Sex (%)

Year	Men	Women
2001	66.6	42.0
2011	75.2	56.5

Source. Census of India 2001 & 2011

2011, and a similar trend is found concerning the population of SCs, i.e., a decline in the gender gap from 26.2 per cent in 1991, to 24.7 per cent in 2001, to 18.7 per cent in 2011 (Acharya & Sahoo, 2019). Notably, the gender gap in SC communities was relatively higher than the total population of India. This is shown in the following Table (Table 3).

Table 3 Gender Gap Ratio in India

Year	Gender Gap Ratio (%)	
	SCs	All India
1991	26.2	24.8
2001	24.7	21.6
2011	18.7	16.2

Source. Primary Census Abstract for Scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes 2011, Census of India 2011.

The literacy rate of SCs in Tamil Nadu State was 73.26 per cent in 2011, as compared to the overall state literacy rate of 80.09 per cent (Census Report of India, 2011). Of the total literacy rate of SCs in the State, men's was 75.6 per cent, and women's 58.7 per cent. These proportions are significantly higher than the all-India average of 73 per cent for men and 52.1 per cent for women.

The Reservation Policy has enabled Dalit students to access higher education. Nevertheless, their enrolment rate in higher education is relatively lower than that of their non-Dalit counterparts. The All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), 2019, reported that the overall enrolment ratio of students (18–23 years) in higher education was 26.3 per cent, of which boys comprised 26.3 per cent and girls comprised 26.4 per cent. However, in the same age group, the enrolment ratio of Dalit students in higher education is 23 per cent, of whom 22.7 per cent were boys and 23.3 per cent were girls.

The Reservation Policy continues to help several thousand Dalit men and women graduates secure positions in the public sector. Moreover, an increasing number of qualified young Dalit men and women are securing key positions in government departments, as well as positions in the Indian Administrative Service and Indian Police

Service. The families of employed Dalit men and women have become financially stable enough to educate their children, with the aim of helping secure employment by availing the benefits of the Reservation Policy. Particularly educated youngsters from these families will carry forward the agenda of promoting Dalit identity and rights across India.

As regards the Dalit labour force, the data in the following table (Table 4) show that there was an increasing trend in the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) and Worker Population Ratio (WPR) from 2020–2021 to 2022–2023 and a decreasing trend in their Unemployment Rate (UR) during the same period.

Table 4 Employment Rate of Scheduled Castes (%)

2020-21			2021-2022			2022-2023		
LFPR	WPR	UR	LFPR	WPR	UR	LFPR	WPR	UR
49.3	44.9	2.7	49.2	48	2.4	51.6	50.7	1.8

Source. Government of India: Ministry of Labour and Employment (*Lok Sabha Question 86, July 29, 2024*).

This development in their employment is mainly due to the extension of the Reservation Policy since 1950. Moreover, the proportion of Dalits in central government services increased from 16.63 per cent in 2004 to 17.55 per cent in 2014 (Annual Report, 2016–17 & Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions, Government of India). However, it is also reported that over one-third of the Dalits from various divisions live in poverty, and a sizeable proportion of them in rural areas still depend on land owned by Caste-Hindus for their livelihood.

7 Continuance of untouchability and suppression

Despite improvements in their educational and employment status and the consequent improvement in their socio-economic condition, untouchability continues in one form or another in several villages in India, including rural Tamil Nadu. In support of this claim, Thorat and Joshi (2020, pp. 37–38) have stated: "Although the practice of untouchability has been constitutionally banned since the passage of the Untouchability (Offences) Act of 1955, it continues in certain forms not only in private social interactions, but also in the public sector." This may be because many of them are engaged in garbage collection and disposal, as well as cleaning public places and dry latrines. Thorat (2002, p. 578), in attempting to answer why caste discrimination and untouchability remain prevalent in India, pointed out that high-caste people still believe in the concept of 'purity and pollution' associated with the caste system.

Even at the present time, the Dalits are not only deprived of some fundamental rights but also suppressed and exploited by members of upper-caste groups. Moreover, the practice of keeping separate tumblers for Caste–Hindus and Dalits in tea stalls is still in vogue in some states, particularly Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. For instance, a 2012 study (Evidence, 2012) on the 'two tumbler system' in tea shops in a southern district of Tamil Nadu disclosed that tea was served to Dalits and Caste-Hindus in separate tumblers. In some villages, the Dalits were asked to wash their tumblers after drinking tea. In other villages, Caste Hindus were allowed to sit on benches in the tea shops, whereas Dalits had to stand outside. Moreover, the quality of tea served to the Caste-Hindus is better than that served to Dalits.

As regards the present situation of the Dalits in India, the *Crime in India* report (National Crime Records Bureau, 2022) shows that they continue to be vulnerable to caste-based suppression and atrocities. The rate of crime against the Dalits rose from 25.3 per cent in 2021 to 28.6 per cent in 2022. Caste-Hindus have committed different sorts of crimes against the Dalits for different reasons. In contemporary times, it is observed that the development of Dalits in socio-economic spheres has posed a challenge to the Caste-Hindus all over India. Therefore, conflict between the two rival communities has become an inescapable phenomenon. For instance, caste-related conflicts in southern districts of Tamil Nadu frequently occur between Dalits and the Thevars, who are keen on retaining their hegemony (Manikumar, 2024).

8 Dalit movements and political mobilisation

Ambedkar played an important role in awakening the Dalit consciousness and laid a solid foundation for the Dalit movement. He launched a major anti-untouchability movement in Maharashtra in the 1920s to fight social stigma. Afterwards, he led the *Mahad Satyagraha*[9] in 1927 to secure the right to drink water from a lake in Mahad city, Maharashtra State, India. He then organised the second *Satyagraha* in March 1930 to secure the entry of Dalits into *Kalaram* temple in Nashik city of Maharashtra (Dhankhar, 2022). Likewise, he led a 'Neo-Life Movement' (Neo-Buddhist Movement), during which he and his followers converted to Buddhism on October 14, 1956, in Nagpur, Maharashtra.

For the Dalits, Ambedkar chose conversion to Buddhism for two reasons: Firstly, he believed that the concept of untouchability was deeply rooted in Hinduism. Hence, Hindus could not give up this practice. Second, he believed the most effective path to social justice for the Dalits was to break away from the Hindu fold and embrace Buddhism, based on the principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity. He considered Buddhism a faith compatible with Indian culture, and hence he believed that this conversion movement would emancipate the Dalits and help eliminate untouchability. After him, the Dalit Movement seemed to focus more on mainstream politics than on caste discrimination and untouchability.

Since the main demands of the Dalit representatives were ignored by upper-caste politicians, they started organising separate political parties to voice their demands. For instance, in 1984, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP–Majority People's Party) was organised by Kanshi Ram in Uttar Pradesh, a North Indian State. The term *Bahujan* literally means 'community in the majority', and includes Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, along with religious minorities. Its main objective was to achieve social justice and equality through economic emancipation and social transformation of the *Bahujan*. Kumar (2002) observed that the BSP, under the leadership of Kanshi Ram, brought the most significant change in the psyche of Dalits by providing them with an identity, vision, ideology, and political strategy, and emerged as a significant player in the game of power politics. Later, in 2001, Kumari Mayawati became his successor and began working to raise Dalit consciousness by politically mobilising the Bahujan.

Its electoral successes, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, were groundbreaking and revealed a paradigm shift in power dynamics. Its ability to form electoral alliances and secure support from diverse communities was crucial to its rise to prominence. De-

[9] Satyagraha means a policy of passive political resistance.

spite confronting challenges, it remained firm in its commitment to social justice and equality and declined to give them up for short-term benefit. However, it was not very effective in awakening social consciousness among the marginalised groups across India to fight for social justice and equality. Importantly, the onset of the Dalit (Rights) Movement in India tried to shake up the socio-cultural hegemony of upper castes. Nevertheless, it often seemed reduced to voicing Dalits' grievances rather than campaigning proactively for greater social change.

Dalit politics in contemporary India has evolved with the rise of various independent Dalit political parties. This political power is necessary for mobilising the Dalits to strive for social justice, equal rights and affirmative action. For instance, in Tamil Nadu, the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK, meaning Liberation Panthers' Party) has given Dalits a vehicle to bring their issues to a wider political platform. Importantly, recently, its leader, Thirumavalavan, has raised his voice, seeking power in government (The Hindu, 2024). The party has allied with parties at the state and national levels to gain political advantage. Ambedkar's ideology also continues to inspire and guide Dalit political leaders to fight untouchability, caste discrimination, and economic disparity, build a collective Dalit identity, and advocate their rights. However, the weakness of Dalit politics is that it often revolves around caste-based identity mobilisation.

Now, the key question is: Are Dalits ready to move beyond their internal divisions and unite as a single community to strengthen and accelerate their movement to counter the problems posed by the Cast-Hindus? In reality, various Dalit divisions pursue caste-based mobilisation to organise politically for benefits in proportion to their numerical strength. For instance, Karthigeyan et al. (2012) observed that, in Tamil Nadu, *Puthiya Tamilagam* (New Tamil Society), a regional political party, called on *Pallars* (a Scheduled Caste) to organise themselves within the party to gain recognition as *Devendra Kula Vellalars*[10] and obtain various benefits. Afterwards, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* was mainly organised by the *Paraiyars*.[11] Nevertheless, this kind of caste-based political mobilisation across different Dalit divisions will not help them achieve their goals. Therefore, they should not be part of caste-based movements but rather part of a mass-based Dalit movement to consolidate their votes into a bloc and break up the caste-based politics dominated by members of the upper castes.

9 The future of the Dalits

Dalits' growing awareness of their rights and equality, and their enduring protests for justice through political activism, have led to notable improvements in their socio-economic status. Their protests, which target all sorts of discrimination, are supported by human rights organisations and NGOs. The next generation of Dalit leaders may introduce fresh perspectives and strategies to extend the scope and reach of Dalit politics. For them, Ambedkar's ideas continue to serve as guiding principles to strengthen their political mobilisation. His call to 'educate, organise and struggle' has an unrelenting impact, especially on the minds of young Dalits. His emphasis on education, self-reliance, and social justice guides Dalit movements across all states in South India and a few states in North India, particularly Maharashtra. However, a frequently

[10] According to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Devendrakula Vellalar is a collective name for seven divisions of Dalits.

[11] The term Paraiyar comes from the Tamil word for drum, parai, reflecting their traditional role as drum makers and players in auspicious as well as in inauspicious occasions.

asked question is whether independent Dalit politics in India has a future in creating positive change by empowering Dalits economically, socially, and politically. The answer may be yes if they organise themselves under the banner of one political party that cuts across internal divisions and sub-caste rivalries. Therefore, the strength of Dalit politics lies in their integration and collective participation in their movements.

Nevertheless, the prevailing caste system continues to counter the Dalits' attempts to move towards power to surpass the Caste-Hindus. It seems that the Caste-Hindus prefer not to leave their caste fold to mix with the Dalits to practice commensality and connubiality in an unconditional way. Even though the caste system is undergoing changes in contemporary India, its deep roots perpetuate its existence and wield power in all areas of life. This is possible because changes occur in its function, but seldom in its structure. In other words, by relaxing certain norms, it undergoes change by assuming new functions without altering its structure. Thus, it adapts itself to changing situations because of its resilient nature. This 'flexibility' sustains its roots firmly in Indian soil while keeping its structure unaltered. If it remained a rigid social institution and resisted change, it would tend to become unstable and disappear altogether. Therefore, changes in the caste system are keeping pace with the social changes ushered in by modernity and the advancement of science and technology. If it continues to prevail in Indian society in the years to come, some of its oppressive features will also continue to restrict the development of the Dalits.

After independence, one important development in the caste system was the formation of several hundred caste associations across India. They are, Srinivas (1966) noted, very much concerned with the improvement of the socio-economic standing of the respective castes. Therefore, caste associations serve as an adaptive mechanism of the caste system and sustain it. Karunanithi (2001) observed that the political mobilisation of different caste groups in Tamil Nadu State largely stems from the formation of their caste associations. Consequently, over time, several caste-based political parties have emerged, mostly at the regional level. This shows the phenomenon of the regeneration or reincarnation of the age-old caste system from time to time, as it wields power in all walks of life. Consequently, caste discrimination, social injustice and untouchability continue to exist in India in one form or another.

10 Conclusion

This paper has attempted to discuss the situation of Dalit communities in past as well as at present, their menial and 'polluting' tasks, and the stigma of untouchability against the backdrop of the caste system in India. It discusses Dalit movements and their role in awakening Dalit consciousness and driving political mobilisation through national and regional political parties to gain power. It focuses on constitutional provisions intended to safeguard their rights and interests, as well as affirmative action that provides opportunities to improve their educational and employment status. Based on these discussions, it may be concluded that it is rather difficult to root out the caste system from Indian society. Hence, social (caste) hierarchy will continue to exist in one form or another with its resultant factors- caste discrimination and social inequality- in the years to come.

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A new Social Europe: A Polányian response to turmoil and authoritarianism

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Abstract

Using a Polányian frame the article gives a broad overview of economic history with a focus on the post-war and embedded liberalism, where markets were more regulated, but then transformed in the 1970s with the ascendancy of neoliberalism towards a more disembedded market economy, giving rise to new economic elites and the marketisation of institutions and society. The article details how a disembedded and de-regulated economy contributed to the 2008 global financial and the 2012 eurozone crises, both of which have fuelled a reactive and deceptive, rather than progressive, countermovement in the form of the rise of authoritarian populism based on nativist political agendas. The article advocates a new radical consensus which creates an economically and socially embedded society that enables intervention and equitable balance and fosters inclusive and civic notions of citizenship and community through the concept of a New Social Europe.

Keywords: *Polányi, authoritarian populism, critical multiculturalism, dis/embedded economies, hyperglobalism, Social Europe*

1 Introduction

For over a decade Europe has been in a deep crisis. Economic dysfunction materialised in the 2008 global and 2012 eurozone crises, prompting a policy response based on austerity. Austerity and economic malaise have fuelled a rise in authoritarian populism that has created a global political crisis as evidenced by the discord and division created by populist demagoguery, often expressed in Culture War rhetoric that is nostalgic and reactionary. In addition, growing challenges to the rule of law/international law have led to the conflict in Ukraine and failed insurrection in the USA and radicalism of the second Trump presidency.

Although the global economic crisis was triggered by neoliberalism, the economic elites with vested interests in marketisation have in fact managed to bolster their supremacy and deflect blame for the crisis. This deflection has been aided by authoritarian populists who though purporting to be the champions of 'the people' are advancing political agendas that are to the benefit of economic elites promising tax cuts or deregulation or patronage.

The article advocates the need for a new turn, an embedded economic, social and cultural transformation within society, this line of argument is heavily influenced by the thinking of the Hungarian Karl Polányi. In order to develop this line of argument the article outlines the thinking of Polányi and places the aforementioned crises in

some historical context. The article makes use of what can be termed the 'soft' and 'hard' interpretations of Polányi, the soft version emphasising the value of democratic control of institutions and empowerment through mutualism, whilst the hard emphasises the dangers of the free-market and global neoliberal order (Peck, 2013). The article will elaborate later on these two stances, suffice to say for now, at times in the past there has been friction between the adherents of soft and hard Polányian frames, with the hard Polányian faction deriding the soft faction as moderates who fail to adequately challenge the central flaws of capitalism and the soft Polányianists accusing the hard faction of dogmatic vanguardism. The article seeks to fuse the two approaches and create a new consensus among Polányianists.

2 A Polányian historical economic overview

Karl Polányi (1886–1964) was an economic sociologist who left Austria in 1933 and relocated to Britain, setting to work on his magnus opus *The Great Transformation*, published in 1944. In this work Polányi sought to make sense of the great political, social and economic turbulence of his age (Dale, 2016a).

In *The Great Transformation* Polányi (2002) through economic sociology describes a pre-industrial age where society was deeply rooted in social relations. Polányi argued that social embeddedness as reflected through social values, a sense of community and trust created forms of community cohesion. Those engaged in economic activity were, according to Polányi, more in control of their economic destiny, especially where they might be land owning farmers or self-employed craftsmen. A strong communitarian set of norms, values and moral beliefs were said by Polányi to help create a sense of community and coping mechanism for the challenges communities faced. The industrial revolution though created a paradigm shift, a huge transformation that disembedded economic activity. Capitalist control of the means of production created a sense of anomie and powerlessness among workers, commodifying labour, land and money and disembedding it from the communitarian values that had according to Polányi once placed some restraint on economic rapaciousness. In other words, these fundamental bases of social life were treated as if they were ordinary commodities and were subjected to market exchange (Hager et al., 2022).

As capitalism gained in its ascendancy, especially in Great Britain, the first industrialised and global economic hegemon, the new economic practices of the industrial age were refined into a doctrine of laissez-faire capitalism. Economic thinkers like Ricardo and Malthus espoused the virtues of a free market, which can almost be described as a form of economic Darwinism which advocated non-interference in the market and faith in the self-correcting qualities of untrammelled competition that invariably in pursuit of greater profits meant the erosion of workers' rights and renumeration. The gold standard was a manifestation of the new economic doctrine and the new age of economic globalisation, a monetary system in which paper money is freely convertible into a fixed amount of gold (Eichengreen & Flandreau, 1997).

In 1821, Great Britain became the first country to officially adopt a gold standard, Germany adopted it in 1900, by this stage most developed nations had done the same. The belief was that linking currencies to gold deterred inflation and created a stable currency conducive to trade and a self-regulating market. However, linking currencies to a gold standard created constraints on governments, limiting their ability to intervene and respond to crisis (Searcy, 1993). In The Great Transformation, Polányi (2002)

demonstrated how the gold standard restrained the development of welfare policy, empowering a financial elite above the elected political elites, asserting the primacy of the market above society, further disembedding the market (Saval, 2016). Polányi argued that faith in unregulated markets was built upon a fallacy as the market, if left to its own devices created dysfunction and chaos. Invariably such crisis prompted what Polányi described as a 'double-movement', a reflexive countermovement that urged intervention, regulation, protection and reform to restrain the volatility of the market.

The high point of this laissez-faire ascendancy was to come in the period 1870 to 1914, but the economic rivalry of Britain and Germany which found form in the search for global markets through imperialism spiralled out of control, indicating the dangers of fusing economic rapaciousness with chauvinistic nationalism, resulting in World War One and the beginning of a process of fragmentation for the gold standard. During World War One the gold standard was suspended but after the war governments, most notably Britain sought to restore it. However, this created through the 1920s deflation and high unemployment. The economic reparations imposed primarily on Germany at part of the Versailles Treaty in 1919 also proved to be a hindrance to not only German but European growth. The tipping point to crisis was the Great Depression prompted by the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Economic depression was deeply aggravated by the Smoot-Hawley Tariffs introduced in the U.S in 1930 and named after its senatorial sponsors under President Hoover, the protectionist tariffs are widely held to have greatly contributed to the downward trade spiral of the Great Depression (Irwin, 1996). The Depression was exacerbated by the currency and banking crisis of 1931 where a poorly regulated gold standard created a financial crisis.

Roosevelt's New Deal of federal intervention and stimulus can be viewed as a form of double movement, an attempt to restrain the vagaries of a dysfunctional market. In Germany the Nazis, who came to power on the back of economic collapse, introduced a planned and interventionist economic programme centred on infrastructure projects and rearmament, this can be seen as a Fascistic double-movement, an attempt to re-embed the economy to the service of the state but premised on militarism and expansion which inevitably led to the Second World War (Hermann & Mahnkopf, 2010). Fascism also created a rigid and insular conception of national identity fuelled by agonism, in other words a deep polarisation centred around notions of 'us and them', with Jews being the ultimate outsiders. For Polányi fascism was a product of the dysfunctions caused by the market utopianism of self-regulating markets.

The post-war period was described by the French economist Fourastié (2011) as the trente glorieuses (glorious thirty) a period of economic growth and expansion from about 1945 to 1973. Ruggie (1982) described it as 'embedded liberalism'. It was a period where the economics of Keynes was in the ascendancy countenancing intervention and redistribution in the form of nationalisation of key industries and expansion of welfare state provision. At the economic core of this was the Bretton Woods system established in 1944. The Bretton Woods system required countries to guarantee convertibility of their currencies into U.S. dollars which was convertible to gold. In addition, future competitive devaluations were deterred through an inter-governmentally negotiated consensus policed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), which limited the scope for speculative tendencies that had triggered the Great Depression (Steil, 2013).

Keynes, who was present at the Bretton Woods summit, proposed that surplus

trade nations be compelled to import from debtor nations or conduct economic development in such countries. However, the U.S. opposed this and instead the International Monetary Fund was given the task and resources to counteract speculative finance flows. This US dominated framework created a kind of indirect colonialism, debtor nations in the third world continued to be at a disadvantage even as they transitioned to democracy and independence. This disadvantage was compounded by the post-war expansion and rising living standards in the global north being in part fuelled by the cheap commodity prices the international system imposed on global south exports (Benton, 2017). The unfairness of the system became more pronounced with the development of the Washington Consensus, a system that promoted what Stiglitz (2009) has described as market fundamentalism. This transformative turn in the global economic order came about in 1973 when the US decoupled the dollar from the gold standard because of inflationary pressures caused by the huge expenditure of the Vietnam war but this fuelled an explosion of international liquidity that fanned inflation, aggravated by the steep rise in oil prices engineered by OPEC. This shock to the system and interruption to post-war economic stability gave rise to the myth that statism and intervention had created the crisis and that there was a need to restore faith in the power of the market.

As noted earlier the return of a gold standard contributed to economic dysfunction in the interwar years, but the cessation of the neo-version as represented by Bretton-Woods in turn caused market dysfunction in the 1970s. As noted in reference to Keynes's progressive aspirations for what became Bretton Woods, what is important in global economic regulatory frameworks are the questions of who the principal beneficiaries are, and the degree of equity designed into an economic regulatory framework. Rather than creating a more equitable and transparent global economic framework its sudden dissolution by the Nixon administration led to excessive financial deregulation and speculation, creating an entirely new type of problem, especially for the global south and disadvantaged. The crisis of capitalism in the 1970s was prompted by the fall in profits due to the diminishing returns to technological innovation. In other words, each additional technological improvement is successively less capable of generating more output. The cost of materials, rising labour costs and the tax demands of statism were factors that led to sections of the capitalist class coalescing around neoliberalism which manifested in a political mobilization clamoring for reduced tax and regulation (Volscho, 2015).

The ideas of free-market economists like Hayek and Friedman, gained traction in an economic vision we now term neoliberalism, a new period of disembeddedness where the state and economic involvement contracted, and societies became highly vulnerable to the volatility of the market came to the fore (Berman, 2022). The neoliberal turn created a highly globalised world dominated by multinationals and advanced technologies that facilitated the rapid transfer of capital in an increasing deregulated economic system. The epitome of this new economic order was complex financial products like derivatives, financial products that involved the bundling of a range of financial assets that can themselves be traded as commodities, some valued in the hundreds of millions. The financier Warren Buffett (2002) rightfully derided derivates as a financial weapon of mass destruction. The danger of such complex products being that they greatly increase leverage and risk in the market. Derivatives, including subprime loans, caused by easy credit and a highly unregulated market and banking system were to act as a catalyst to the global financial crisis of 2008, a perfect illustration

of the dangers as Polányi would have seen them of a free market (Fraser, 2014).

Unfortunately, the global financial crisis rather than leading to a fundamental rethink on the nature and functioning of the neoliberal order, has bolstered the dominance of market forces. To gain deeper insights into that process, the article reflects on what happened in the wake of the global crisis in Europe.

3 Crisis in Europe

An important feature in the economic architecture of the post-war period was the movement towards European integration, in part to fulfil the dream of the key visionaries behind this process, namely Jean Monet and Robert Schuman, to prevent another war but in part it was also a project spawned by the US, believing a large integrated market of various states could replicate the success of the US (Delanty, 1995). A key aim of European integration as articulated in the Treaty of Rome in 1957 which created the European Economic Community was the eventual creation of a single market. It was not until the Single European Act of 1987, setting a timetable for the single market and the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 that set an aim to create a single currency, that this vision of deep economic integration started to become a reality, giving birth to the European Union.

The single currency unwittingly replicated some of the defects of the gold standard. The currency was disembedded from political governance in the sense that there was a lack of institutional control and overview. As Stiglitz (2016) notes, too much faith was placed in the power and efficiency of self-regulating markets and neoliberal principles such as the notion of low inflation nurturing growth and prosperity, reflecting the political dominance of the neoliberal right in Europe at the time (Andor, 2020). A key problem with the single currency was that it was geared to the interests of German exporters who believed a stable currency and low inflation would assist them and indeed Germany was able to accrue huge trade surpluses. Low inflation which eurozone members were obliged to achieve through the Stability and Growth Pact of 1997 committed governments to low deficits, three per cent of GDP, with financial penalties for those that erred (Bibow, 2012). Here we see what is termed as ordoliberalism. Ordoliberalism can be defined as an economic philosophy that supports the state taking a role in establishing the framework conditions for a liberal economic order and prescribes a rule-based economic policy geared towards fiscal discipline and price stability (Bruno, 2022).

The low interest rates created a credit boom, partly fuelled by the German surplus, weaker members of the Eurozone took advantage of the easy credit to borrow to increase public spending, the public took advantage of this cheap credit through increased consumer spending, especially on housing which created housing bubbles. The danger with the Euro was that it created a single currency on a very heterogeneous group of countries with different fiscal structures and traditions and social attitudes (Feldstein, 2011). Basically, northern EU states like Germany that can be termed as surplus states relied on export-based growth whilst in southern Europe it can be said there was more of a tradition of growth based on supply, inclined to make use of cheap credit, which was indeed the case in the early years of the euro. The problems of the Eurozone were compounded by a lack of clear understanding of how these different systems would work together and combined with the lack of institutional and central oversight was destined for disaster. In terms of lack of oversight and political author-

ity in Polányian terms the Euro as it then stood, could be described as more socially 'disembedded' than previous currency unions (Parker & Tsarouhas, 2018).

The asymmetry within the euro was accentuated by financialization, a transnational banking sector and liberalized capital market channelled surpluses from core, or what can be described as surplus states like Germany to the creditor economies at the periphery of Europe. A process aided by deregulation and over leveraging, a 'house of cards' was thus built on highly unstable financial foundations (Baldwin & F. Giavazzi, 2015). The weaknesses of the Eurozone were exposed in the global financial crisis of 2008 that revealed the true scale of debt and vulnerability of creditor and surplus states and the resulting credit crunch with high interest rates. Countries heavily in debt and vulnerable because of the earlier credit boom and housing bubbles such as Greece, Ireland, Italy, Spain and Portugal risked a default on their debt, there was a risk of contagion, a domino effect, whereby the crisis could bring down the Eurozone bloc, which nearly occurred in 2012.

Germany under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel framed the crisis as one of fiscal irresponsibility on the part of countries like Greece rather than present it as a product of poor planning and forward thinking. Critics have argued Germany was in great part responsible for the crisis having been one of the principal champions of the eventual form the euro took. Furthermore, it should be noted that Germany was one of the first countries to break the three per cent rule of the Growth and Stability Pact (Bibow, 2012). Germany was to accentuate the crisis by promoting an ordoliberal approach where EU institutions through a Fiscal Compact in 2012, a form of Treaty, compelling eurozone members to balance their books and reduce their deficits or suffer financial penalties if they failed in deficit reduction. Deficit reduction via the Treaty was achieved through savage programmes of austerity, cutting public expenditure. De Witte described this as the constitutionalisation of austerity led by a troika of the European Central Bank, European Commission and International Monetary Fund, with Germany being the central driver (Dawson & de Witte, 2013).

Vulnerable economies like Greece initially resisted these drastic measures but had the stark choice of accepting these harsh terms or drop out of the eurozone and suffer an economic meltdown. The German thinker Habermas railed against the leadership of Germany accusing it through its ordoliberal diktats of eroding democracy in Europe and behaving in an authoritarian manner that treated states like Greece as children (Oltermann, 2015). Austerity went against the logic and rationale of how to respond to economic crisis when normally deficit spending and stimulus is encouraged to spur growth, instead austerity across Europe did the opposite and created a deep decade long crisis in Europe that had extreme economic and political consequences that will be elaborated upon later.

Jacques Delors President of the European Commission (1985-1995) had been one of the key architects of the single market and currency and had embraced free market ordoliberal notions, this conversion from classic post-war social democratic economic thinking took place following the failure of his Keynesian fiscal stimulus policies when Finance Minister (1981-1984) under President Mitterrand. In an attempt to balance the free market mantra of the policies he pursued in the commission, he sought to temper them with some moderate social policy interventions, that can be termed as the European Social Model or Social Europe.

'Social Europe' was a concept in the 1970s and 1980s, promoted by social-democratic/left voices in Western Europe who sought to achieve a social market

economy via the European Economic Community/EU, thus leaving behind more statist and nationalist conceptions of post-war socialism. Ryder (2020) notes Social Europe encompassed wealth redistribution; social and economic planning; economic democratization; improved working and living conditions; regulation and control of economic forces; guarantees of the right to work; upward convergence of European social regimes; and access to social protection for all. It could be viewed as a civilizational project based on Enlightenment values promoting forms of solidarity and cosmopolitanism, although the latter point was often weakly articulated. Delors though was only able to implant a weak form of Social Europe into the new European Union, primarily through the Social Charter which guaranteed fundamental social and economic rights in employment, housing, health, education, social protection and welfare. Even these modest measures were too much to stomach for British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who denounced the Social Charter as 'socialism through the back door' (Thatcher, 1988). Some would argue that ultimately the Thatcherite neoliberal vision of Europe triumphed with the needs of the single market prevailing over the European Social Model.

Caporaso and Tarrow (2009) have argued that elements of the European Social Model such as the European Court of Justice and its interventions in labour rights present a Polányian form of countermovement. Such an assertion is unjustified, the preceding description of the evolution of the single market and currency in this paper, demonstrates that the needs of the market were predominant in EU decision making (Dale & El-Enany, 2013). Such was the weakness of the European Social Model little was done to alleviate the huge social suffering created by austerity, a problem compounded by a swing against the left following the financial global crisis where Centre-Left Governments in power such as the Labour Party in Britain were blamed for the crisis by the political right because of supposed spendthrift policies (Skidelsky, 2015). The embrace by the European Centre-Left of neoliberal orthodoxy following the example of Delors and articulated in the timidity of the 'Third Way' meant the Centre-Left were poorly placed to frame the causes of the crisis as a product of unfettered market policies and a need for a Polányian countermovement based on robust socialist policies.

In the wake of the global financial crisis and eurozone crisis investment dropped drastically by around 20 per cent, with some economies recording a drop of more than 40 per cent. About 6.7 million jobs were lost between 2008 and 2013, youth unemployment reached staggering proportions, increasing in Europe from 15.5 per cent in 2007 to 23.5 per cent in 2013. Precarious employment and benefit cuts also impeded the life chances of many (European Parliament, 2019). This huge economic shock added to the strain suffered by the poor regions of Europe after decades of deindustrialisation, and deeper transition across Europe to neoliberal economic regimes fractured the social contract, no longer was there a commitment to full employment. Welfare services and public services deteriorated through poor funding, commodification and privatisation. This economic and welfare dislocation fractured communities, working class identities and solidarities evaporated as a consequence of de-industrialisation and neoliberal structural change, those at the margins but also the old and poorly educated, were also perturbed by the rapid cultural changes induced by globalisation, challenging old certainties and more rigid conceptions of identity (Ford & Goodwin, 2014).

Societal frustrations found a political home in reactive political forces steered by authoritarian populist leaders like Trump, Orbán, Le Pen and Farage among others

who have embraced agonistic discourses levelling the blame at migrants, outsiders and liberal elites, of which the EU stood paramount in debates in Europe. These populist forces were often fuelled by a mix of economic and cultural fears which found solace in retreating into tradition and a craving for monocultural enclaves (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). These responses to crisis can be viewed as in the 1930s with the rise of fascism as a reactive double-movement (see earlier discussion). However, in the case of these new reactive double-movements there is little countenance by the radical right for stimulus with the blame for the ills of society being deceptively presented as the fault of migrants, welfare dependency, Wokeism (political correctness) and or liberal elites (Ryder, 2020). In the case of Trump federal intervention has expressed itself in his second presidency in forms of economic nativism in the form of tariffs targeted at 'economic competitors'.

Brexit can be viewed as part of the 'reactive double-movement', couched and framed in populist rhetoric centred on anti-migrant sentiments and culture war themes of a fear of losing national identity the campaign and debate was deceptive. A key element on the part of a section of the British and political elite was hyperglobalism. A more rampant and deregulated form of neoliberalism that it was believed would stem Britain's economic decline in a world of growing multipolarity in which US and British dominance are in relative decline and the financial system and markets are increasingly unstable (Kwarteng & Truss, 2012). Consequently, some countries like Britain, at the core of what Wallerstein (2011) describes as the more dominant and advanced economies, have been searching for alternative strategies. Hyperglobalist conceptions of Brexit, as championed by the radical right, can be viewed as an attempt to rival the low tax, low regulation and low social protection countries in the semi-periphery, those economies that are less advanced, stable and are in effect developing. Countries that are striving to become major economic powers. By freeing itself of Europe's social protections and regulations it was hoped a 'race to the bottom' could enable Britain to attain greater economic strength. The former Conservative Chancellor Nigel Lawson (2016) clearly articulated the hyperglobalist intentions of Brexit when he stated that leaving EU regulation would allow Britain to 'finish the job that Margaret Thatcher started'. Prime Minister Liz Truss's radical tax cutting budget was a catalyst to huge market dysfunction, leading to her resignation, denting the hopes for achieving a hyperglobalist vision of Brexit (Helm & Inman, 2022). The failure of the Truss budget played a major role in the Conservatives losing power and a Labour government coming to office with a more cautious vision of how Brexit should be interpreted into policy.

The remedy to the travails and crisis Europe has suffered for over a decade rest in a Polányian response that creates economic and social embeddedness, in other words a situation where the interests of society prevail over the vagaries of the market, rather than vice versa as is the aspiration of the hyperglobalists.

4 Economic and social embeddedness

In the final section the article outlines how transformative change in economic and social practices could constitute a Polányian form of double movement that creates equilibrium rather than dysfunction and averts the economic, environmental and political crisis that seems to be the present trajectory of an increasingly anarchic and combustible market driven world. In part the article departs from Polányi and adds

a cultural dimension that was absent in his writing relevant to the cultural realities of the globalised 21st century. In propounding antidotes although advocating transformative change the article proposes a deliberative political solution reflecting Polányi's faith and belief in democracy that avoids the vanguardism and dogmatic conceptualisations of some elements of the radical political spectrum that Polányi on the whole had little time for.

The New Left thinking of the 1960s, a group the soft Polányianists would feel at home with, became frustrated with the statism, bureaucratisation and rigidity of Marxist Leninism, giving greater emphasis to recognition as opposed to redistribution. The orthodox left, where some of the hard Polányianists would feel at home, saw such a stance as a form of capitulation to neoliberalism, hence a deepening fracture emerged amongst the centre left. The article is seeking to draw inspiration from the best of hard and soft Polányists, discussed at the start of the paper by propounding the case for fundamental economic and social change being the ultimate goal (hard Polányi) but delivered through gradualism, deliberation and community-based solutions (soft Polányi).

Although the structure of the European single market and currency has been geared to the interests of the market there are indicators of a shift. The European Pillar of Social Rights introduced at the 2017 Gothenburg Summit has sought to bolster social Europe by building a fairer and better functioning labour market and welfare systems in Europe. A key goal has been trying to establish a minimum wage in EU member states. Another important development has been the EU Covid Recovery Fund where a total of €2.018 trillion is available for member states to help revive economies and avert recession as a consequence of the pandemic. Not only is this a major stimulatory measure but it relies on borrowed finance in the form of bonds and is a departure from the ordoliberal fetish of balanced books. The Future of Europe Conference that concluded in 2022 where the EU sought to create a platform where European citizens could articulate their aspirations seemed to indicate a desire from the public for a more interventionist, fairer and democratic Europe.

The economist Stiglitz (2019) is among those calling for bolder action in the rewriting of the European economy, radically reforming the single currency and completing a banking union to create a proper regulatory framework for the currency and proper risk sharing convergence. Ultimately what might be needed is something akin to the global economic clearing union as envisaged by Keynes (see earlier discussion). A fair and equitable European Union might even in the opinion of Habermas (2013) provide something of a model that other global regions might emulate, in Latin America and Africa attempts are being made to create unions with pretensions to emulate the European Union. Although a vision of a European Union premised on robust Social Europe principles and acting as a role model might appear to be Eurocentric, in terms of resources, institutional structures and democratic traditions Europe might be best placed in leading the way in a new harmonious based global/regional economic order. Huebner (2014) states:

'Bringing Polányi back into town needs a substantive vision of a global economy that needs institutional safeguards in order to avoid crisis and unequal distribution of benefits and costs. Such agreements need to be designed in order to become trendsetters in organising and moderating global flows of goods and services as well as various forms of capital and also labour in a way that satisfies all criteria for a socially, economically as well as environmentally sustainable growth path'.

Such moves towards equitable global economic governance could see Piketty (2014)'s call for a global progressive tax become a reality and strengthen global equality, creating a countermovement to a race to the bottom by emphasising the value and importance of strong social protections. Of course, we live in a world where since the rise of neoliberalism progressive tax has been shunned and demonised, but that does not mean that one day the public and even sections of the economic elite will not again embrace such a position as was the case in the postwar period. Such a change is dependent on change in how we frame poverty, moving away from culture of poverty narratives that blame the poor or neoliberal claims that strong welfare systems sap the strength of economies. Good welfare access would need to be seen as a human right and not a social and economic burden (Lister, 2004). In this sense there would be a return to a form of Polányian social embeddedness where society cares for the disadvantaged rather than demonises them. This renewed and transformed European Union would be based on new conceptions of Social Europe that advocate increasing labour market participation through active welfare state measures, supply-side efforts at job creation, and measures to provide security other than lifetime job tenure and prioritizes efforts to combat social exclusion (Seikel, 2016).

Major economic change would not necessarily mean the literal end of capitalism but would fundamentally change its nature, both Polányi and Keynes believed in markets they just opposed unregulated markets and society being subservient to the whims of market forces (Skidelsky, 2010). In this sense both thinkers in some respects could be said to be similar in outlook to the thinker John Rawls (1971) who contended an important foundation for social justice is a social contract based upon the rational evaluation of society and the threats and opportunities within that society but also means by which the state can maximize equality and opportunity. In other words, Rawls did not want to see the state dictate to commerce every facet of business, but he did want to see a market regulated and restrained from excess. Rawls argued profits and fortunes could be accrued but within reason and without impinging on the life chances of the masses. With reference to the masses, Rawls advocated for forms of welfare safety nets and social protections that could give those at the bottom the resources to pursue all available opportunities and life changes and live a life of dignity. Today Rawl's vision seems utopian and radical but in the liberal postwar it was part of the mainstream.

Conceptualisations of Social Europe though have tended to focus on macroeconomic policy and not given equal weight to political and cultural change, these factors would need to be addressed in a New Social Europe. Strengthening of the rule of law would be an important dynamic in a renewed European Union, it is a testament to the value of the EU that it instigated numerous article 7 proceedings against Hungary for its infringement of human rights conventions and European law to try and check the authoritarian populism of Viktor Orbán when he was in power. Despite its assertiveness on this matter though the most the EU could do was withhold funds from Hungary and could in theory have suspended its voting rights in the European Council. In the future stronger measures may be needed such as the expulsion of serial offenders from the European Union. Ultimately what might be needed is what Habermas termed as constitutional patriotism, a pride and fervour in constitutional law and the sanctity of the rule of law and democracy that resembles at least in intensity the fervour of national identity (Müller & Scheppele, 2008). Such deep commitments will entail a better educated citizenship and educative public sphere, of course

such commitments may be borne out of a Social Europe that is able to address many of the genuine anxieties and insecurities, as opposed to those that are imagined, that stem from market dysfunctions. Both Polányi and Keynes were supporters of British parliamentary democracy and procedure and understood the value of stable democracies in creating progressive societies (Carvalho, 2008; Dale, 2016a). Keynes's and Polányi's respect for parliamentary democracy puts them in some respects within the tradition of Fabian gradualism or Habermas's conception of deliberative democracy, a communicative and open dialogue of reason and rationality (Olson, 2011).

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) in their conception of radical pluralism deride deliberation as a mechanism that stifles dissent and agonism. Mouffe (1999) states antagonism with its damaging enmities can become a constructive agonism in which 'us' and 'them' cleavages can have value in bringing about meaningful change, conservative forces should be deemed as respected adversaries but radical right groups who frame antagonistic enmities should be excluded and marginalised. As is evident from the populist phenomenon extreme agonism can in fact lead to sharp cleavages and enmities, polarising rhetoric and irrationalism (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2006). The German thinker Carl Schmitt conceived of agonism as an instrument for national identity formation with the nation defining itself in contrast to the 'other', his nation building conception of agonism was utilised by the Nazis of which he was a supporter and demonstrates the dangers of such cleavages (Roskamm, 2015).

Keynes and Polányi were both hesitant about the fanaticism of soviet vanguardism in the USSR which could be viewed as another form of extreme agonism, Polányi believed socialism could only be achieved within Russia when it turned to democracy (Dale, 2016a). In the present time left populism, as with right populism, has alienated some through what might be described as a politics of 'antagonism' based on crude binary thought and speech that shuns consensus. Deliberation and parliamentary process does not necessarily mean moderate and timid policy development as evidenced by the creation of a welfare state in post-war Britain through parliamentary processes. A realization of this argument might be another point of convergence between soft and hard Polányianists and acceptance that broad coalitions of public opinion may need to be established to create a foundation for a progressive double movement, which will necessitate not only deliberation but flexibility and compromise. Deliberative democracy has the propensity for reciprocity, those on the losing side of an argument might respect the outcome and decision made on account of the process and reasoning used to reach a decision (Smith, 2000).

Laclau & Mouffe rightly suggest more should be done to form channels of communication and influence between social movements and parliaments. Laclau & Mouffe are also correct to argue a new radical consensus cannot be based upon technocratic Third Way approaches. This article proposes a radical Polányian approach harnessed to a bolder conception of Fabian gradualism willing to take leaps rather than baby steps.

The form of deliberative democracy advocated in this article is a fusion of radical democracy and deliberation with Polányian micro forms of mutualism and community economics aligned with forms of statism. Here reference can be made to the 'Nordic model', the Scandinavian tradition of comprehensive welfare systems and a robust safety net coupled with progressive taxation. Statism though has been criticised for top-down decision making and a bureaucratic disconnection with communities, hence the article advocates statist approaches being coupled with inclusive forms of

localised community development.

Community Led Local Development (CLLD) is a central part of EU funding opportunities to encourage community economics and involvement in designing and steering development. Using CLLD principles the EU has sought to create inclusion frameworks for Roma communities that espouse the ideals of participatory approaches and mutualism, although the principles of such community-based solutions has been accepted the results have been limited as this initiative is hamstrung by operating in a wider economic context that is marketized and austerity driven that has been counterproductive to Roma inclusion (Ryder, 2024).

A bolder application of CLLD via a Social Europe in a renewed European Union, would promote social embeddedness, the connections and linkages of strong social networks within a web of social attachments such as friendship, community and kinship (Uzzi & Gillespie, 2002). Granovetter (1985) envisaged such embeddedness as economic actions by networks of social relationships among actors, this could be achieved through community economics and mutualism.

Such forms of mutualism and social enterprise have demonstrated transformative potential, but the success stories are limited, such initiatives have tended to be undermined through marketisation, or forms of coproduction has orientated civil society towards service agendas. In addition, austerity and an increasing emphasis on professionalisation by donors has further impeded the ability of civil society to achieve its potential. Improved and more accessible funding from the EU and national governments without rigid conditionalities and or narrow donor driven agendas, giving civil society the resources and room to manoeuvre could contribute to a vibrant and inclusive public sphere capable of challenging the re-feudalisation that Habermas highlighted by giving communities including those at the margins voice and agency and platforms and channels of communication with decision-makers.

5 Cultural and spiritual embeddedness

Culture gives meaning to our lives, shapes our perception of reality and can be interconnected to spirituality in the sense it has the potential to shape our identities and behaviours. Fervour for Europe though will also require a strong sense of European identity as a cohesive glue but as with all identities there are multiple interpretations. What should being European mean in the 21st century? Can it compete with what Anderson (1991) might describe as the nativist 'imagined communities' of populist reaction, discussed earlier? Nancy Fraser (2014) is right to note that a fundamental weakness of Polányi is that he fails to recognise the defect of socially embedded relations which in some cases can present oppression and a loss of freedom because of forms of patriarchy or ethnic hierarchies. Fraser calls for a form of social embeddedness that respects and values individual rights and is emancipatory as well as freeing people from the dictates of the market. In this sense a cosmopolitan, inclusive and flexible framing of European identity might be the most accommodating.

Critical multiculturalism that challenges the social, economic and cultural drivers of exclusion and xenophobia might be a useful instrument in identity building (May & Sleeter, 2010). It is a more intercultural and deliberative form of identity management that recognises that identity is neither rigid nor static and that change, and innovation is both possible and to be welcomed and the best guarantor of individual rights in a complex world of multiple, situational and changing identities. It is also conducive

to civic conceptions of national and European identities, that can even be described as post national citizenship, that is inclusive and emphasises constitutional patriotism through valuing freedom, tolerance, equality and individual rights in contrast to ethnocentrism (Ryder, 2020).

Importantly, such an outlook defies the antagonistic tendencies of early conceptions of European identity that in the Middle Ages sought to define and articulate a notion of Europe as a reaction to a perceived Muslim threat (Delanty, 1995). It is also a vision that defies the eurocentrism of the enlightenment and belief in the supremacy and superiority of Europe. It is a mindset that can develop social embeddedness beyond Europe and create the culture of global cooperation that Habermas (2013) has long dreamt of. Such an approach would help Europe return to the post-war ideal of Europe as a citadel of tolerance, freedom and social rights. It was an ideal that was in effect a countermovement to the extremes of fascism and was an attempt to protect Europe in the future from such extremes, since the 1970s that economic and political firewall has been dismantled and brought the world much closer to the evils of fascism than what most observers would have once dared to predict. Aside from a reorientation in identity there is a need for change in our psyche. Polányi following his experiences in the first world war jettisoned his pre-war antipathy to religion in the sense of developing a more spiritual awareness, here Polányi may also have value in crafting transformation. The increasing commodification of the economic world has also shaped the habitus of the life world, increasingly every aspect of our working lives and the policies that impact upon us is shaped by audit cultures, in every area of life no aspect seems to be sacrosanct even knowledge production and academia seems to be increasingly hemmed in by audit and corporate culture (Brown, 2015). Mindsets and dispositions seem to be increasingly shaped not just by competition and rivalry, but forms of market fetishism or consumerism drive an increasing marketisation of society which incentivises society to the socio-economic and environmental cost of a market driven society. Thus, to secure the transformations that this article seeks to secure we need to change not just policy at the macro and micro level, as set-out in this article, but change and adapt our habitus, behaviour and dispositions. As this paper has argued Polányian change at the macro and micro level will create new socio-economic dynamics, creating a culture of altruism and deep bonds and affiliations within the world of work, and the communities within which we live, nationally and internationally.

6 Conclusion

As noted in this article Polányi sought to act as a siren to the dangers of the power of free markets and the belief in their power as a form of economic hubris. Elements of the radical right in reactive counter movements have embraced hyperglobalism and combined it with forms of nativism. In the US President Trump in his second term has crafted an alternative reactive countermovement based on fusing nativism with protectionist economic policies imposing tariffs on trade rivals. The article is in effect arguing that the rise of the radical right or what could be described as authoritarian populism, although taking different economic positions give credence to the predictions of Polányi and Dahrendorf that neoliberalism might transform into forms of fascism and authoritarianism. Although these detours initially might appear to be in contradiction with globalisation as reflected by sentiments favouring a retreat into the nation state and opposition to free movement of labour, the fusion of neoliberal-

ism and nationalist populism seems to be a relatively simple form of political merger, facilitating further downsizing and dilution of social protections (Fekete, 2017). As argued in this article the panacea might be a progressive countermovement centred on social justice and embeddedness.

The article has outlined a fusion and reorientation of hard and soft Polányian thinking that recognises the power of identities and how these can be manipulated by power elites, The conscientization of such manipulation however through the development of more cosmopolitan and fluid notions of identity and ethnicity can be fused with bolder conceptions of social justice that appreciates more fully the dynamics of how neoliberalism in crisis has contributed to the reactive double-movement. Such a fusion though also warrants a deeper conscientization of the complex and dysfunctional nature of neoliberalism.

Transformative policies in this new Polányian double-movement might though have to be stepping stones in the form of limited reforms such is the complexity of a globalised neoliberal order that it can be difficult to achieve deep change without economic blocs working in unison. However, this does not preclude articulating concerns about the nature of that system and the need for eventual fundamental change. Soft Polányians became too comfortable with third way neoliberal economic aspirations, this needs to change given the clear failure of such a system to deliver meaningful social justice. The article whilst valuing the power of grassroots community mobilisation which has been increasingly heralded by new left social movements also seeks to raise the appreciation of the value of parliamentarianism and the rule of law as major contributors to transformative change, as noted in the article Polányi with his appreciation of the British parliament valued these attributes, they have not always though been sufficiently appreciated by modern day hard Polányianists. Ultimately the hard and soft hard Polányianists need to realise old habits of infighting are a luxury given the growing threat of the reactive double-movement and that there is value in the old socialist maxim 'unity is strength'.

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Hierarchies of clientelism, brokerage, and indebtedness in illiberal Hungary

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Abstract

Emerging from collective, comparative ethnographic research done in Hungary on the moral dimensions of dependent relations and the values participants attach to them, this paper introduces a conceptual framework for the study of exchange relations in states of dependence. We follow the bottom-up approach of economic anthropological thinking and the ethnographic theorization of morality: we conceive dependent relations as durable forms of hierarchy and we study situated judgments in real-life settings. As people exchange personal favors or impersonal forms of service provision, their hierarchical dependent relations foster everyday struggles pertaining to value and the moral evaluations of ideas such as fairness or social justice. Addressing the interplay of moral and political economy, our ethnography presents everyday economic strategies and decisions embedded in hierarchically dependent relations of clientelism, brokerage, and indebtedness. With the rising over-indebtedness and financial over-inclusion of the poor, clientelist hierarchies of brokerage re-emerged and diversified in post-socialist rural Hungary. Everyday financialization was mediated by reconfigured and emerging forms of dependence. Clientelist domination is based on hierarchy that connects partners in unequal positions to each other, hence it ameliorates the effects of social inequality or pacifies class antagonisms. Still, it may represent a better, morally approved option for marginalized people who strive to secure their livelihood via personalized channels under constant threat of economic violence and legal action from debt enforcement. Through analyzing the dependent relations of working-class and marginalized people in Hungary who are making their living in prolonged economic insecurity, we formulate ideas on the nature of 'actually existing' capitalism in Hungary, three decades after 1989.

Keywords: *ependence, moral economy, clientelism, brokerage, financialization of everyday life, over-indebtedness*

1 Introduction

On a warm autumn evening in 2019, we were sitting in Kópi's garden, celebrating his re-election victory as the mayor in Lápos, a small village in North Hungary. Durst asked him about the secret of his success. He readily replied:

People here want security, they need someone that they can belong to, that's what they were grown into... When I came to the village, five years ago, I started to pick out the people I could deal with... I also picked Mona, put her in the nursery as an

assistant. [...] Those I picked were the people I saw as capable of development, about ten of them from the village. [...] Regarding the others, I cannot do much with them... But many of them feel that I care for them, I distribute the money [that he gets as mayor from the state treasury] to them: every week I distribute something, housing allowance, public works wages. I try to split up the pay for them, because they can't manage it themselves... Also, I usually give public workers an interest-free advance on their wages when they need emergency help.

Mona, the woman the mayor mentioned, has been a close interlocutor of Durst. She was one of the local Roma people receiving his patronage (as a part of his inner circle or clientele, as we shall say). Mona has stayed loyal to the mayor during the years that Durst has been following her life.

This paper explores the (re)production, revitalization and moral deliberation – or moral economy – of dependent relations in the process of everyday financialization—a recent development in contemporary capitalism. As the ethnographic vignette shows, one of the principal social organizing forms in contemporary rural Hungary, despite financialization, is still the personalistic, patron–client relations. In our investigation, we employ relational sociology that focuses on 'bonds instead of essences' (Blokland, 2013; Desmond, 2014). We believe that social and economic processes build on different institutional frameworks involving multiple scales, creating complex and often contradictory environments in which people survive or thrive, cooperate or compete. Our empirical investigation focuses on relations of dependence and hierarchy, considering dependence as a mode of action (Ferguson, 2013) that can best be understood by observing the real-life practices of social actors. To do this, we focus on an economically underdeveloped region in Northern Hungary, and in it, a village we call Lápos[1], calling attention to the ways in which ordinary people make everyday economic decisions that are embedded in various regimes and hierarchies of value.

As E. P. Thompson (1971) and James Scott (1976) suggest, the moral dimensions of the economy often come to the surface—that is, articulated and become objects of social scrutiny—at times of systemic change featuring great or small transformations (Róna-Tas, 1997). Capitalist incorporation invokes a variety of (often retrospective) references to 'custom,' including everyday ideas of fairness, obligation or the 'just price,' in different exchange relations. Szelényi and Mihályi (2019) claims that global inequalities have increased and transformed in nature since the 1970s, especially after the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2008. Capitalism is becoming less class-based and more firmly grounded in rank, where the possession and transmission of privilege or entitlement are primarily matters of personalized channels of access (Szelényi & Mihályi, 2019, p. 65). To put it differently, class-based polarization is ameliorated by the personalized relations between actors in different positions of hierarchy and power. In patrimonial forms of domination, power and wealth are distributed in accordance with the 'grace' or good will of rulers or patrons who are accompanied by members of a staff (or, in other words, the 'inner circle' of exchange partners in the case of individual brokers as opposed to the 'outer circle' of recipients (see Auyero, 2000).

Susana Narotzky suggests that in southern Europe since 2008, prospects for upward social mobility or even stable employment have become increasingly elusive (Narotzky, 2020). She argues that we are presently witnessing a move toward an increasingly illiberal form of capitalism, in which actors with greater power obtain more

[1] The settlement name is fictitious and all the protagonists' names are changed to protect their anonymity.

privileges to save themselves from the inconveniences of market competition. These practices simultaneously mean re-embedding the economy by using non-contractual obligations to access resources premised on personal status rather than universal rights. In fact, Narotzky adds that this is hardly a novelty: capitalism has always combined the practice of competition with the objective of reaping monopoly rents and limiting competition through political leverage (Narotzky, 2020).

The thesis of the crisis-ridden re-feudalization of contemporary capitalism (see also Verdery, 1996; or for Hungary: Szalai, 2017) requires careful investigation, in terms of historical continuities and ruptures, as well as the persistence and transformation of social organization and the patterns of everyday problem-solving. As James Ferguson has famously argued, coming to terms with persistent forms of hierarchical social arrangements may be difficult for those who are committed to the critique of power relations and the pursuit of social justice defined as individualism or egalitarianism (Ferguson, 2013). From such an angle, patrimonialism or clientelism seem to provide a counter-image, to hold a distorted mirror to typically progressive Euro-American ideas about the rights-bearing individual, autonomous participation and horizontal models of civic engagement. Ferguson drew on the history of capitalism in twentieth-century South Africa, where 'modernization' did not do away with personalistic and dependent relations between employers and employees.

Put simply, the concepts of patrimonialism and clientelism address similar modes of social organization at different scales: state formation in the former, and interpersonal exchange in the latter. Clientelism and brokerage can be conceptualized as building blocks of hierarchical rank order, which are maintained by acts of selective solidarity that draw boundaries between the deserving and undeserving for exclusion or inclusion in exchanges of favors (for the latter, see: Henig & Makovicky, 2016). The concept of selective or bonded solidarity indicates that in everyday reciprocity chains, people rely on each other for support within carefully restricted hierarchical exchange networks in accordance with their needs (Portes, 2010; Shamur, 2023). Clientelist domination mitigates the extreme inequalities of contemporary capitalism by offering (or withholding) access to selective solidarity: entitlements, concessions, forms of security, help, loan, welfare, or valuable information. Selective access matters when problem-solving is not granted automatically (let alone universally) but rather is secured through personal means of provision, such as access to services, money or information from the donor or broker in exchange for loyalty, support and in some cases, work (Dés & Durst, 2026) from clients.

Economic and political anthropologists are well-equipped to study the moral economy of dependence by developing multi-scalar perspectives that comprehend the local, national, and global layers of even a single case (see also Brković, 2022). Living in one of the most economically disadvantaged regions in Hungary, our protagonists are embedded in multiple and various dependent relations to make a living. We explore how these dependent, hierarchical relationships are (re)produced, morally deliberated, organized, interconnected, and how people choose particular dependencies in a context of prolonged insecurity, or a permanent state of scarcity.

In this paper, we elaborate the two types of dependent relations most prevalent in our ethnographic field study: clientelism (and brokerage), and debt relations. Through these concepts, we seek to account for the moral economy of dependencies amid multiple crises of livelihood and social reproduction.

First, we critically review the theories of clientelism, brokerage, and debt in the po-

litical economic context of financialization and contemporary capitalism that some authors define as flexible capitalism (Kjaerulff, 2015) or financialized capitalism (Weiss, 2020). Second, we examine the global, national, and local contexts of our study, and the structure of opportunities that conditions the choices among practices of social reproduction. Third, we explore the most prevalent dependent relations and patterns of problem-solving in Lápos, in our ethnographic field site, through two case studies. In conclusion, we argue that dispossessed people with restricted access to quality education resort to dependent relations in crisis-ridden times and amid diminished structural opportunities to secure their social reproduction. During the process of everyday financialization, or household financialization, we can witness the revival and reconfiguration of hierarchical clientelist relations. Unequal forms of exchange have a role in pacifying increasing inequalities and class antagonism that has resulted from great or small transformations, such as the transitions from late-to post-socialist and then to illiberal Hungary.

2 Theories of clientelism and brokerage

According to Tina Hilgers, clientelism in Latin America (as elsewhere) is a mechanism of social control that undermines horizontal class relations, allowing a certain elite to maintain its power (Hilgers, 2011). Seemingly voluntary participation in clientelist relations is often based on the denial of access to resources, or the fear of repression if clients do not comply with a patron's wishes. Although the terms of any agreement between patrons and their clients are not based on formal law, the parties are aware of their obligations to reciprocate but also of the fact that the failure to reciprocate can lead to the termination of their relationship. The practices of clientelism and brokerage therefore enforce a particular understanding of politics or the political: in such cases, politics or political practices refer to the mutual conduct of problem holders and the problem solvers who 'get things done,' exchanging information or guarantees of security for personalized support and loyalty (Auyero, 2000).

Patron–client relations are far from merely premodern survivals or a manifestation of backwardness. Rather, they play a prime role in the pacification of social conflict by mitigating against—or managing the consequences of—polarization through means and customs otherwise inherited from a feudal past. In Hungary, ethnologists Fél and Hofer (1973) studied patron–client relationships among peasants before the state-socialist collectivization of agriculture. As land became a commodity in the mid-nineteenth century, the patron–client relation guaranteed that the peasantry could remain a meaningful unit of social organization (see also Hofer, 1991). Amid the contradictions of growing inequality and enduring symbolic solidarity, clientelism produced carefully elaborated, efficient vertical relations that sewed together different strata within the same community. Mutual obligations and customary tasks bonded together the related families and persons, in spite of their asymmetrical positions. Practically, this entailed relations of dependence, whereby richer members gained advantage at the expense of poorer ones, who nevertheless remained interested in maintaining the relation for prestige and hope for reciprocal services. The exchange of labor or material goods was disguised as a voluntary favor between patrons and clients, as in gift relations, where partners keep the element of calculation hidden. As Fél and Hofer suggested, Hungarian peasants consented to participating in such forms of unequal exchange, even if it was apparent that for the poorer partners (and their

households), providing the same objects or services for the transaction is much more difficult than for more affluent partners, requiring greater investments of time, work, and energy.

As economic sociologist Tibor Kuczi notes, in the traditional Hungarian peasant economy, the family and the organization of work did not have impermeable boundaries. Acts of securing loyalty and linking an external labor force to the economic unit were secured through a pattern of family relations (Kuczi, 2000, p. 89). The post-socialist leaders of farms and agricultural holdings therefore had only to apply an existing pattern to organize relations of authority in broader social settings. Following the dissolution of co-operative state farms after 1989, formal leadership positions were abolished, but former members still considered the former leaders to be the most competent persons (a *helyzet urai* in colloquial Hungarian), expecting them to resolve problems and provide job opportunities. Indeed, the former leaders of the co-operatives could rely on their paternalistic relations when they set up a new enterprise, being recognized as members of the local elite. In many settings without alternative livelihood opportunities, locals depended on a single potential employer, which led to re-feudalization in the organization of labor (Kuczi, 2000, p. 98). Consequently, patron–client relations re-emerged after state-socialism as a durable way of binding workers or business partners to entrepreneurs.

The extensive scholarship on patron–client relations in different geographical settings, from Latin-America and South-Africa through Mediterranean Europe to post-socialist regions has many parallel findings. They all show that relations involving clientelism and brokerage constitute networks of domination and dependence that regulate the flow of the labor force, services, material goods, and the distribution of loyalty.

Although customary forms of clientelism entail a duality, in most cases, there are in fact triangular (or even more complex) relations between different providers and recipients, including brokers. As Madelaine Reeves documents, when looking at ways to make a life in the Russian capital, migrant workers from Central Asia are dependent on a range of intermediaries (Reeves, 2016). Kyrgyz housing brokers in Moscow facilitate other migrants' access to the temporary housing market by serving as informal 'landlords,' making money from the migrants' economic vulnerability and unfamiliarity with the city (Reeves, 2016, p. 95). The skill of the broker inheres in the capacity to move between different affective registers and rationalities. The affective complexity of brokerage relations requires that such relations mediate differential access to socially valued goods. In post-socialist and post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, access to welfare could be considered a civil right on the one hand, and a charitable donation between well-intended partners on the other (Brković, 2020). Favors cannot always be returned on a mutual basis; in such a case, extending help to others could increase the problem solver's influence and prestige, eventually leading to an official political position. In Bosnia, getting ahead by helping others and pursuing favors (and personal connections) established 'a sense of self as a moral person,' while also reproducing hierarchies between people in different positions of power (Brković, 2022, p. 84). Thus, clientelism became a form of brokerage activity with social relations, in which the practical search for resources is inseparable from the construction of individuals as social persons as the sum of those relations they have or may have access to.

We argue that clientelism and brokerage represent a mode of integration, even during the contemporary process of financialization of everyday life. As long as it works,

clientelist domination effectively prevents the manifestations of social unrest resulting from the polarization of wealth and the accompanying sense of social injustice. More wealthy or influential patrons, donors, and brokers engage in the exchanges of favors, objects, and services on clearly unequal grounds with their subordinated clients. Still, during the ritual of exchange, the partners tend to recognize one another as equals, engaging in mutual aid or belonging to the same horizontal comradeship, not unlike the case of nationalism as famously interpreted by Benedict Anderson (2003). This illusion, however obvious in the eyes of observers, is crucial for the establishment of clientelism as an enduring form of sociality, based on the ideal of mutuality (as in the proverbial saying, 'I help you as you help me'). By exchanging loyalty for privilege and support for security, patrons and clients appear to invest themselves wholeheartedly in hierarchically dependent relations, despite their unequal positions of power and influence. To persist, relations of clientelism and brokerage do not necessarily require any form of deeply held conviction or ideological indoctrination. As in other instances of repeated forms of exchange, it is the sense of obligation (as the 'need to reciprocate') that eventually maintains the relationship. The power lies in the exchanges, whatever partners might think of each other outside those exchange situations. Rather than property and status, the main organizational units of clientelist formations are (potentially manifold) congregates of support and loyalty that tie together—and hence pacify—partners in otherwise highly unequal positions. In sum, clientelism and brokerage are forms of social organization that foster loyalty in a hierarchical set of personalized relations, based on the exchange of obligation and support for security and well-being. Clientelism is therefore based on principles of social organization that work against the articulation of class differences in society.

Clientelism and brokerage are therefore deeply ambiguous for many participants as well as observers. However, hierarchical aspirations are the habitual elements of clientelism, expressed in people's various attempts to secure their position within existing power structures rather than subverting those structures in the name of social inequality. In addition to social and economic benefits, clientelism provides security at a more existential level, including protection from outside threats as well as the excesses of state (and financial institutions') power. Importantly, clientelist societies are not without social mobility: actors may improve their position by developing their own clientele, reproducing the patterns of subordination to which they have been exposed in other settings (Kovai & Vigvári, 2025).

3 Theories of everyday financialization and debt relations

In recent decades, especially after the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), financialization has become the "go-to-term" for studying the expanded role of finance in contemporary politics, economy and society (Weiss, 2020), capturing the key empirical development in contemporary capitalism. Among the many approaches within financialization scholarship, there is a growing body of ethnographic research on the incorporation of 'low income and subproletarian populations into financial markets (Saiag, 2020; Schuster & Kar, 2021); that is, how finance reshapes everyday practices, culture, subjectivities and relationships of those living on the margins of society. This thread of research is lumped under the umbrella term of 'Financialization of everyday life' (FoEL). Although the FoEL approach itself is used in different senses, for our topic the most relevant are the ones that are interested in the financial behavior of households

and in the cultural shift in contemporary capitalism: the making of financialized subjectivities in everyday life. Meanwhile the former is concerned with the households' use of financial products and the massive increase in their financial liabilities (Gonzales, 2015), the latter is interested in how finance penetrated people's everyday life (Pellandini-Simányi et al., 2015) and to what extent people's subjectivities are financialized (that is, engaging in rational financial calculation or looking for opportunities to invest their money (Fligstein & Goldstein, 2015).

The FoEL terminology connects the concept to longer traditions in cultural studies, anthropology, and sociology (Pellandini-Simányi, 2020) that considered the everyday as a site where larger (social, economic, political and cultural) structures are reproduced—or challenged—through daily routines (De Certeau, 1984). One of the key findings of this scholarship is that people do not simply adopt financial logics in everyday life, in a way that financial logics would overwrite other logics such as logic of care of domestic relations or moral logics (Mikuš & Rodik, 2021), but rather, finance can be 'domesticated' (Pellandini-Simányi et al., 2015) —appropriated and reinterpreted according to existing subjectivities and social ties, and re-articulated as part of moral economies (Wilkis, 2015). This is, however, as Wilkis asserts, not a one-way process but through the interaction with finance, subjectivities and social ties are also shifted in new directions.

At the same time, as household financialization globally expands, a recently growing scholarship on the 'financialization of poverty' in the Global South (Kar, 2018; Lavinas, 2020) draws our attention on the process how the financial inclusion of the poor through microfinance—a device imagined to reduce poverty—re-configure local relations and create new hierarchies and unequal patron-client relationships between local borrowers and lenders (Guérin, 2014; Kar, 2018).

This 'everyday financialization of households' perspective resonates to our approach in this paper as we analyze how people and their households in a state of permanent scarcity and interwoven dependencies make economic and financial decisions in their real-life settings, under structural constraints, on the basis of their situated judgements and moral deliberations and how these multiple dependences (among them debt-dependencies) are to co-constitute new hierarchies and unequal clientelist relations.

Different waves of the relational process of the financialization (Hann & Kalb, 2020) of everyday life or household financialization can be tracked in Hungary since late socialism. Since the 1980s, the Hungarian population has experienced indebtedness, but due to the relatively rapid post-socialist transformation and the regionally uneven increase in unemployment and poverty rates, defaulting or non-performing debt rates have skyrocketed.

The first wave of indebtedness began in the 1980s, when a substantial per centage of the urban population could not pay their utility bills and fell into arrears on rent and other housing-related costs owing to increasing prices and growing poverty (Győri, 1995; Kerényi, 1998). In addition to utility arrears, the financial strain on households was further exacerbated by the transition from socialism to capitalism. Following the transitional crisis of the 1990s, the Hungarian population underwent a further wave of household 'bankarization' and 'financialization' (Lazarus, 2017) through the widespread use of standard financial services such as opening bank accounts, consumer loans, mortgages, as well as risky non-standard financial products such as Swiss franc loans. According to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, at the end

of the (GFC), 5.1 million people—52 per cent of the population—lived in households holding one or more credit contracts (KSH, 2011; Pellandini-Simányi & Vargha, 2020; Misetics, 2020, pp. 128–157; Gagyi & Gerőcs, 2025).

These crises heightened the financial vulnerabilities of households, and the GFC further eroded household financial resilience, resulting in falling living standards. By the mid-2010s, the GFC had evolved into a prolonged non-performing-loan (NPL) crisis (Mertens & Metz, 2022). Hard data is scarce in Hungary, and few sources show that in the early years of the NPL crisis, roughly 130,000 households, comprising around 330,000 individuals, fell into arrears on their bank loans. Debt enforcement also intensified: a rare official release from the Hungarian government reported approximately 700,000 debt-enforcement proceedings (Bajomi & Pinkasz, 2018). Additional data from the Hungarian Chamber of Notaries (MOKK) and the National Office for the Judiciary (OBH) indicate that between 2008 and 2022, debt collectors initiated around 300,000–400,000 enforcement procedures annually—a substantial rise from the 200,000 to 300,000 cases recorded between 1998 and 2007. In a rare instance, the Hungarian Ministry of Justice (IM) released data on the territorial distribution of new debt-enforcement cases (2018–2020), which show that the economically marginal Northern Hungary region is significantly more affected by debt enforcement than the more developed Western Transdanubia. In Northern Hungary, approximately 10 per cent of the adult population faces debt enforcement. Although the GFC started in 2007, the crisis is still not over yet (Major, 2020).

The sweeping economic and financial changes of the 1990s and 2000s resulted in the rise of illiberalism (Gyöngyösi & Verner, 2022; Scheiring & Szombati, 2020) and financial nationalism—economic and financial interventions that broadly align with populist political agendas (Piroska, 2021)—coupled with a new EU-level financial regulatory regime prioritizing a macroprudential policy to minimize the risk in the banking sector. The sweeping economic changes were accompanied by cultural changes, and increasing problem debts (Mikuš & Sabaté, 2025) became a collective concern for a significant segment of Hungarian society, simultaneously making it a political imperative for illiberalism (Gagyi & Gerőcs, 2025). Since the 1990s, many debtors have been living with unpayable debts in so-called 'debt traps' (Berlinger et al., 2021).

Such over-indebtedness can shape hierarchies and reconfigure the relationships within them. The high prevalence of people living with problem debts proliferated, and they are called the so-called non-performing people who live their lives under the continuing bureaucratic administration of debt collection and enforcement (García-Lamarca, 2022). The current NPL crisis, high levels of financial vulnerabilities, and the high number of debt enforcement proceedings made debt collection companies and the debt enforcement bureaucracy central intermediary organizations that manage unpaid debts and the overindebted households (Bródy & Pósfai, 2020). The institutions and organizations that collect and enforce debt are instrumental in managing people's lives, a fact sociological research must take into account (Ossandón et al., 2022). Such companies are generating a particular form of financialized capitalism on the ground by 'making debt work' (Mikuš, 2020) and ensure that money flows from debtors to creditors and from the economic peripheries to the center/core countries (Schuster & Kar, 2021). Although local and international debt-collection companies have existed in Hungary since the early 1990s, their role in the management of households falling into arrears has increased significantly.

Creditor-debtor relations are understood in anthropology through the lens of mu-

tual obligation between creditors and debtors, which is the foundation of seeing debt as a social relation beyond purely an economic one (Guérin, 2014). Roitman (2003) argues that debt is, however, the founding mark of a fundamentally asymmetric social relationship and a situation of dependency. Guérin and colleagues (2007) have shown in an Indian context that such situations of dependency are enacted through the specific practice of wage advancement, facilitating a kind of new bonded labor, when seasonal laborers form dependent relations with owners of brick kiln factories, accepting advance wage payments to secure their yearlong employment. But the advance is beneficial for the factory owners too, who use it to bond labor and to restrict alternative opportunities, such as working for another factory or prematurely leaving seasonal migrant employment. Although creditor-debtor relations are fundamentally unequal relations, mutuality and morality do not completely disappear and often develop into relationships similar to client-patron relations. Such is the case with the shopkeepers (some of them offering informal credits), embedded in local neighborhoods who form patron-client ties with their impoverished clientele. Although many shopkeepers know that their customers will never be able to pay off their debts, they do not pursue repayment aggressively as it would break the social custom of mutuality and cause reputational damage to the shopkeepers themself (Carrier, 2021).

Credit relations might be understood by creditors and debtors as mutual in the case of socially embedded environments, in social proximity of the creditor and debtor, as well as in the context of performing loans, loans which are being repaid. However, in the context of non-performing loans, over-indebtedness, and household financialization, when loans are not being repaid, emphasizing mutuality is rather a normative one and not a descriptive one, as 'being in debt' means a constant threat of economic violence and legal action from debt enforcement (Davey, 2024). Being in debt triggers particular reactions from debtors, such as ignoring debts and being optimistic about the future and hoping that they will somehow get by.

Overindebtedness and default has generated its own social relationships, and being in debt also reconfigures social and economic ties and creates new hierarchies, as life in default is a constant yet unequal negotiation with bailiffs and debt collectors who use expropriating coercive legal techniques and aggressive marketing tactics to extract payment from defaulting debtors (Davey, 2025; Deville, 2015). Noelle Stout (2019) shows that in the case of household default, the inequality and dependent nature of creditor-debtor relations are encapsulated by the interaction between household debtors and finance workers representing banks. Debtors facing eviction and repossession of their homes have to petition banks to modify their credit contracts, yet the decisions they receive are arbitrary and dependent on personal relations and the knowledge of bureaucratic processes. Such knowledge of the bureaucracy of finance creates new forms of dependent relations and spaces for intermediation for lawyers, debt advisors, and others promising debtors to reduce their indebtedness (Sosnowski Krabbe, 2023).

Debtors who have to face such harsh economic realities of debt collection and enforcement have strategies to face off debt collectors and bailiffs, usually informal ones. First of all, debtors in such economic circumstances usually cut back consumption and move from the market to the domain of household and kinship. Overindebtedness makes households move to urban peripheral fringes, non-residential areas of garden allotments—previously (during socialism) used as recreational areas—as a form of informal housing (Gagyi et al., 2021; Vigvári, 2022). Borrowers rely on kinship

networks and family ties to obtain credit (Medgyesi, 2016). Gosztonyi (2025) shows in the context of tabloid stories of middle-class debtors that those who could repay their high-risk debts turned to family members and friends to obtain informal credit to pay off formal credit. Many overindebted households flee their creditors and move abroad as a modern form of leg-bailing to avoid punitive debt enforcement in Hungary (Durst & Stewart, 2025; Peebles, 2013). Debt enforcement also makes household debtors move from the formal labor market to the informal one to avoid debt enforcement proceedings such as wage garnishment (Berlinger et al., 2021; Bródy & Pósfai, 2020). All of these strategies are embedded in local dependencies and are catalysts for client-patron relations. Household overindebtedness and default is a debt dependency in itself but also intersects with other forms of dependencies and client-patron relations tied to the macro architecture of the illiberal state.

4 Research context

Illiberalism in present-day Hungary is a (striking) instance of social organization on the basis of rank, a form of hierarchical domination that pacifies extreme inequalities by means of selective solidarity. The central figures of this economy in underdeveloped rural areas include different kinds of patrons and brokers such as local mayors, home construction or building contractor small entrepreneurs, credit advisers, informal moneylenders, and migrant labor recruiters. These social agents are embedded in patron–client relations, playing central roles in facilitating the workings, managing the ambiguities (Brković, 2020), and smoothing the contradictions of the (illiberal) market economy by filling its institutional voids. In other words, these practices of informal brokerage "oil the wheels of formal capitalist institutions and spaces" (McCollum & Findlay, 2015, 2018), while enabling the social reproduction of the people embedded in them.

As we argue, the existence of patron–client relations is far from being a novelty in Hungary or Europe; rather, the forms and content of clientelism and brokerage have changed during the recent decades, during the unfolding of 'flexibilized', globalized labor market and financialized capitalism. Before Hungary's accession to the EU in 2004, local brokers and patrons (e.g., local mayors, landed peasants, or informal moneylenders) formed dependent relations with economically vulnerable people. After 2004, when the transnational EU-labor market became accessible to Hungarian workers, the importance of informal migrant labor brokers increased significantly. Within low-end, temporary labor markets, both profit-seeking formal intermediaries and informal labor recruiters are widely used by firms and workers in the EU, owing to the increasing desire for flexibility under the impact of fierce global competition (Jones, 2014; Jones & Sha, 2020; Žabko et al., 2018). These wider global political economic contexts—together with the relative stagnation of living standards in many parts of Eastern Europe—have given rise to the burgeoning use of informal intermediaries by companies in Western Europe. These intermediaries or brokers garner substantial commissions by encouraging low-skilled, often destitute, overindebted laborers from the semi-peripheral Eastern European countries, with no command of foreign languages, to move to a Western European country (in the case of the North Hungarian region mainly to Germany and the Netherlands), by facilitating their employment, travel, and accommodation (Durst & Stewart, 2025).

The above-mentioned national tendencies of Hungarian households' indebtedness

can also be traced in Lápos, the field site of this study. Drawing on Durst's long-term, ongoing ethnographic research in the village and its region, we examine how over-indebtedness has facilitated the reconfiguration of social relations and hierarchies through the diversification of customary old patron–client relations— and with it, the 'return of the (new kind of) brokers' (James, 2011). These brokers also contribute to the evolution of new forms of hierarchical relations, such as bonded labor regimes (Guérin, 2014), in which precarious Hungarian workers—including many dispossessed, low-educated Roma—are impelled to make a living under conditions of over-indebtedness.

First, however, we shall introduce our field site. Lápos is a small village in Northern Hungary, one of the most economically depressed regions in the country. Around the regime change at the beginning of the 1990s, its population was 580 people, of whom 40 per cent were non-Roma Hungarians. Nowadays, it is a 'Gypsy village', as the locals call it, with 820 inhabitants, including a total of only three non-Roma Hungarian nuclear families. The close-knit local community of Gypsies/Roma, who are all related by kinship, comprises four large extended families or 'bands' (*banda*), as they call themselves. For structural reasons, the vast majority of the village's Roma population has been struggling in a constant state of economic insecurity, and a permanent state of scarcity. The 1989 post-socialist transition from a state-run economy to a market economy, which was accompanied by the closure of many state-owned factories and the entrenchment of 1.4 million wage laborers by 1994 (Kertesi, 2005), was hardest on the most vulnerable members of society—the long dispossessed, poorly educated, and socially marginalized Roma.

Until ten years ago, when the dissolution of the village's Gypsy settlements (supported by an EU-funded developmental aid program) gave the final push to the out-migration of the remaining non-Roma Hungarian population of Lápos (Durst, 2015) Gypsies lived alongside with the landed peasants, or as the local Gypsies called them, the 'Hungarians'. The basis of their social and economic interactions can be best described as a form of hierarchical domination, that is, based on the pattern of patron–client relationships. We use the term 'hierarchy' following Graeber, that is, as a relation between parties where one party is considered to be 'socially superior,' a relation that is opposed to the relations of 'communism' characterized by cooperation and sharing which presume equivalence (Graeber, 2010, p. 6). The customary form of clientelism was an asymmetrical, long-term relation, embedded in everyday life, comprising an element of affection as well as mutual obligations on behalf of both parties. In Lápos, as in many other rural settlements in Eastern Europe (Havas, 1999; Fleck & Virág, 1999; Toma, 2005), every landed peasant (non-Roma Hungarian) had their 'own Gypsy.' The Gypsy client provided day labor and other small services to their patron, the non-Roma Hungarian (or 'the peasant'). In return, they received a small payment, either in money or in kind, which was usually well below minimum wage. More importantly, however, in return for the steady availability of the client's labor, the patron also provided flexible assistance whenever special needs or emergencies arose (Platteau, 1995). This rural patron–client relation was 'not limited to transactions of economic goods and services but also include[d] symbolic exchanges of personal favors and obligations' (Platteau, 1995, p. 767). Favors involved a patron lending money (without interest) to their client in situations of need.

With the out-migration of the majority of the local non-Roma Hungarian population and the impoverishment of the remaining few, the long-established patron–client

relation between landed peasants and dispossessed and low-skilled local Roma has diversified, giving way to the appearance of new social actors. Along with clientelism, another hierarchically dependent relation permeated local society, namely, the debt relation. Not only in this village but also in other poor, segregated Roma communities in rural Hungary, debt relations have become one of the dominant types of economic connections (Béres & Lukács, 2008). In Lápos, people have been living with spiraling amounts of debt in recent years. According to our latest household survey in the village in the fall of 2024, around 90 per cent of the Roma population have some kind of debt, whether to formal banks, public utility companies, pawnbrokers or local informal moneylenders. Among the formally indebted households, around 80 per cent belong to the so-called 'non-performing people' (García-Lamarca, 2022) who live their lives under the continuing threat of debt collection and enforcement. Scholars argue that European semi-peripheries such as Southern Europe and Eastern Europe, occupying an intermediate position in the uneven development of real accumulation relations in the world-system, share many similarities in their variegated financialization process (Mikuš & Rodik, 2021). One of these similarities is that banks in these countries exploited ever broader sets of possibilities and credit products due to the under-regulation of consumer credit (Bohle, 2014). In Hungary, banks and foreign financial institutions with an Hungarian branch such as Provident (Durst, 2015) 'mainstreamed predatory lending' (Mikuš, 2020; Somec, 2025), that is, they had been selling exploitative loans to all exploitable borrowers (Aalbers, 2016); among them to the low educated Roma in Lapos whose debt to income ratio was over 60 per cent last year, according to our survey. Beyond this, the Hungarian legal framework of debt collection and debt enforcement is one of the most fierce in Europe (Gosztonyi, 2025)– in the sense that debt collectors are only obliged to leave 60 per cent of the minimum wage (up to now is 116,000 forint (300 Euro) on the defaulted debtors' bank account after their wage garnishment or seizure of savings (*inkasszó*) .

In Lápos, most debtors' unpaid debts are already under the enforcement of a bailiff. The bailiffs can deduct 50 per cent of the debtor's monthly salary as wage garnishment, according to Hungarian law. This debt-enforcement procedure has forced many low-income locals either to work in the informal economy (Berlinger et al., 2021), or to work as a migrant laborer in the free market of the EU, outside the bailiffs' purview, with the help of an informal (or formal) recruiter (Durst & Stewart, 2025).

With this new economic development, along with the global economic transformation, and the concomitant rise of migration, the historically embedded patron–client relations in Lápos has diversified, involving new and multiple social actors. Among them, the figure of the Roma local mayor emerges. The very first Roma leader in village history, Kópi possesses the power to allocate public work among the villagers, due to the decentralization of tackling labor market problems and transferring from competent employment services to municipalities without expertise (Molnár et al., 2019). This public work system, originally intended to be a labor market tool, was launched in 2010 before Viktor Orbán's Fidesz government, aimed at reducing unemployment and living on social benefit by requiring long-term unemployed to participate in state-organized, low-paid public work in exchange for a state subsidized wage. Public workers' wages are below the minimum wage but much higher than social benefits. This large-scale workfare scheme has had considerable impact on local power structures and re-configured a new kind of patron-client relation between local mayors and their public workers. At the same time, it has been playing a significant role

in mitigating social tensions in disadvantaged rural areas (Molnár et al., 2019; Pulay & Kovai, 2025), such as Lápos.

To understand the importance of clientelism and labor brokerage in Lápos, as well as the debt relations that shape people's social reproduction and everyday problem-solving practices, we must appreciate the 'opportunity structure' of the villagers (Pantea, 2022, Roberts, 1977, as cited in). The main tenet of opportunity structure is that different chances and opportunities are structurally available (or not) to different social groups, based on their social locations (their class, ethnicity, etc.). As Lápos is a small, segregated rural settlement at the periphery of the country, some 60 kilometers away from the region's economic center, Miskolc, with hugely underdeveloped infrastructure and public transport facilities, the Láposians face a restricted and narrow horizon of possibilities and field of opportunities. This is in part a result of their limited, low quality schooling opportunities, and racialized discrimination against them in education and on the labor market in Hungary. Consequently, they must resort to different types of dependent relations to make a living.

In Lápos, one of the most attractive income-generating opportunities is working for the multinational factory of Bosch, in the county seat in Miskolc. However, this is possible only for the few, as one requires at least eight grades of schooling and good physical health for this arduous work at the assembly line (12 hours a day, with alternating day and night shifts). The other option, available to more villagers with good connections, is occasional unskilled work in the construction industry, sometimes nearby, but mostly in faraway cities. Finally, for a very few entrepreneurial-minded individuals or 'financialized subjectivities', informal entrepreneurship, such as informal money (and food) lending or informal labor brokerage serves as a channel for upward social mobility. These informal 'businessmen' (as many call themselves) play an important role in facilitating the social reproduction of those who lack material and educational capital, and who therefore are in a precarious position on the formal labor market. In Northern Hungary, the everyday crises and contradictions of a 'flexible' and financialized capitalism are managed and mitigated by a myriad of these 'informal businessmen', that is brokers or intermediates (see for India: Björkman, 2021; for South Africa: James, 2011). Among them, the two important figures in the Láposians' everyday life are the informal moneylenders (Durst, 2015) and the migrant labor brokers (Durst & Stewart, 2025). Their mediating practices are framed by moralizing discourses— they are either contended as 'profiteers' or valorized as 'helpers', but never being spoken of in neutral terms.

In what follows, we examine the important role of these dependent relations in the social reproduction of marginalized people in the studied region. Through two local family histories, we explore how clientelist dependent relations were (re)produced and re-configured with the regime change to a market economy and with the financialization of households; how they were diversified—partly due to the financialization of households and also because of the transformation of the global labor market—from the dyadic ties between patron and client to involve a greater number of actors such as different brokers; and how people choose between different but interwoven dependent relations during structural constraints and on the basis of their moral evaluation.

5 Patterns of social reproduction practices and everyday problem-solving in Lápos: Two case studies

The case studies presented below show that in a context characterized by the transition from state socialism to market economy and the dismantlement of the universal welfare state (Szikra, 2014), social reproduction has been achieved by processual, persistent but at the same time, diversified patterns of personalized dependent relations. As we have seen in the ethnographic vignette in the Introduction section, these are the patron–client and brokered relationships, intersecting with relationships defined by debt. People in marginal social positions (but not only!) resort to these in the crisis-ridden context of illiberal capitalism, in Northern Hungary as part of their strategies for livelihood and problem-solving. The following two case studies explore how these hierarchical dependent relations are constituted, (re)produced and morally deliberated; the ways in which clientelism and debt relation as social integration mechanisms are interconnected; and how people choose one or the other dependencies in the context of prolonged insecurity.

5.1 Case 1. Local dependency as a way of getting ahead

Mona, whom we met at the beginning of the paper as part of Kópi, the mayor's loyal inner circle, comes from one of the well-established local Roma families in Lápos, which has lived in the village for the past one hundred years. Her grandfather was the Gypsy Judge (*cigány bíró* in Hungarian) in the 1960s and 1970s—an important leading figure of the local community, a kind of broker or mediator who performed a bridging role between the Hungarian leaders in power in the neighboring region's district, and the local Roma community during socialism. Her father, adapting to changing social conditions during the transition to a market economy, became the deputy mayor of the village from the early 1990s, second only to the village leader, the (non-Roma Hungarian) mayor, who was the former head of the local school. Mona felt lucky that she had managed to retain her advantageous local position after a series of changes. Her father resigned from his role following the retirement of the Hungarian mayor, then Kópi was elected—the new first man, the 'big boss' of the village and the very first Roma mayor in village history. Thanks to the introduction of the workfare scheme in 2010, the mother of six children with eight grades of schooling managed to take up her first ever employment as a public worker, among 49 other villagers. Even her close family members (her husband and her mother) were among the privileged ones employed at public work as part of Kópi's loyal clientele. Being part of the mayor's clientele meant, for example, that Mona could get advancement from the mayor in case of emergency (such as a family member's funeral), or in the form of an interest-free loan that was deducted in installments from her monthly salaries. It also meant that her daughter, one of the few teenagers in Lápos who went to (but never finished) vocational school in a nearby small town, was employed by the mayor's wife as a sales assistant in the village grocery shop, a family enterprise.

In the context of the big advancement in her family's position, Kópi believed that Mona should take a nursery assistant course in Miskolc, so that he could employ her in the local nursery for triple the salary of a public worker. As one of Kópi's most loyal inner circle, she had different kinds of micro-privileges, mainly in the form of selective and rare access to employment and information. Kópi even gave her an advancement, later to be deducted from her public worker's wage in four monthly installments, to

be able to pay her 10-month course fee. A year later, after Mona had successfully completed the course along with a close friend from the village (another loyal client of Kópi), the mayor employed them in the local nursery as assistants with one of the highest salaries (280,000 HUF, that is 700 Euro) among the Roma villagers in 2022. Half a year later, Mona managed to secure a bank loan, using her salary as a collateral, to the sum of 2 million Hungarian forint (5000 Euro), with a nearly 20 per cent interest rate with 7 years maturity. In possession of an amount that she could never have dreamed of earlier, she managed to pay for the renovation of her family's dilapidated old house. Mona believes that, even if she has to repay the debt for the rest of her life, this was the best available option to solve her housing problems.

In return for the favors, goods, services, and employment secured by Kópi, Mona has ensured her loyalty to the mayor, bringing votes through not only her nuclear but also her extended family (nearly 70 Láposians).When Kópi was taken to prison half a year ago for 'abusing power' (according to the official report, but according to the villagers, because he became too powerful in the eyes of his political supporters, among them the regions' MP), Mona worried about losing her micro-privileges. The campaign for the new local election was a stressful period. Kópi's son-in-law Renato competed with another local Roma candidate, one of Mona's kin, for whom she was compelled to vote out of kinship loyalty. Mona could relax; her kin had won the election, which meant that he as the new mayor had acquired the power to build up his own clientele. Mona was, again, in favor.

With the problem-solving strategy of deeply embedding herself in the local big bosses' patronage network, and with the additional help of a large, formal bank loan, Mona has managed to improve her social status and secure her family's social reproduction in the space of the village.

5.2 Case 2: Migration as a way out of local dependency (off the bailiff's radar)

Adrian is a young Roma man in his mid-twenties, a father of four children with eight grades of schooling, belonging to the second biggest 'band' (extended family) of the village—a band, which has always competed with Mona's kinship group for scarce resources and local power. His family was not part of Kópi's privileged inner circle for the first two periods of his incumbency, and, therefore, Adrian had to seek all kinds of occasional work. "I know who did not vote for me, who supported my opponent, so I made them feel who is ruling. I learnt from the top, from Viktor [Orbán, the Prime minister] the principle of strong governance, that is, to "divide and rule",' said Kópi one day, when Durst asked him about what was behind his success; and also, why he did not employ any of Adrian's close family at public work.Last year, Adrian managed to become a public worker in the neighboring settlement, employed by the local priest. However, his already meager salary did not cover his family's basic needs after the bailiff's deduction of his debt repayment. During the last few years, Adrian had accumulated considerable debt, with unpaid utility bills and hire purchase smartphones—typical forms of debt in his social circle. As he couldn't pay the monthly installments of the phone and the utility bills for more than a year, his debts went under bailiff enforcement. According to harsh debt-enforcement law in Hungary (Gosztonyi, 2025), for these two unpaid debts, 50 per cent of his public work wage was taken by the bailiff as wage garnishment.

So when Renato, Kópi's son-in-law reached out to him and offered him a (not registered, informal) job in his businesses, Adrian happily took this chance. According to

Renato's job offer, Adrian would receive the equivalent amount of his full public work wage in hand (130,000 HUF, that is 320 Euro, around the minimum wage in 2025). This wouldn't be reported, and would therefore be off the bailiff's radar. In this way, he would bring home twice as much money as he did with his public work wage. Renato trusted Adrian as he knew that he, along with his kin group, voted for him in the recent election. Although Renato lost and did not become the village's mayor, he (along with his wife) took over the local grocery shop from his father-in-law while he was serving his time in prison. He made his wealth not only from running the grocery shop in Lápos: he had accumulated considerable capital as a building contractor modernizing and renovating old houses in the region, bought through state subsidized housing loans and the so-called 'families' homemaking grant' (CSOK in Hungarian). He received many of his commissions from the new homeowners of the Láposian Roma, who demonstrated their loyalty to their (former) mayor through supporting his son-in-law's business. Part of this enterprise's profit was accumulated through the use of a cheap but loyal local workforce, always at Renato's disposal.

Adrian had become one of Renato's best laborers during the last six months in 2025. Part of the informal job deal was that Adrian's family could buy goods on credit in Renato's local grocery shop to the limit of 130.000 forint (his monthly salary). From the very beginning, Adrian's wife used her husband's wage as an advancement to buy food for the family in Renato's grocery shop on credit. 'The good thing is that we do not need to worry about feeding the kids,' she said to Durst recently. But she continued, 'However, this is not good either, because we just realized that all of Adrian's salary goes to the grocery shop, and we have hardly had anything left to pay our bills.'

Adrian started to feel like a slave or a maid (*mindenes* or *csicska* in Hungarian). He had to conduct all kinds of labor, from delivering and carrying heavy goods into Renato's shop, to doing all kinds of demanding physical work around his house, to performing any low-skilled tasks in his construction business, even at weekends. Therefore, recently, Adrian started to contemplate leaving Renato's informal employment. However, this was not an easy decision to make. He and his wife understood and feared that leaving Renato would mean losing his support and the favors that so far had guaranteed their family's security and livelihood—in exchange for Adrian's loyalty. Adrian could think of only one alternative to escape his dependent relation with Renato: to go to work abroad, to the Netherlands, 'not to depend on anybody,' as he exclaimed. He resorted to the help of a migrant labor broker from a nearby settlement, who he was introduced to by his friends. Although Adrian knew that the broker would take about 20 per cent of his wage every month as a commission, he learned from his relatives already working abroad that his salary would be three times more than the one he could acquire in Hungary. Therefore, he believes—along with his wife—that this amount of commission is a fair price for the service of the broker who helps him to improve his family's prospects.

Adrian's example shows us that for low-skilled, low-educated people the only room for maneuvering is to choose between one or the other dependency, on the basis of which hierarchical ties they value over the other. The case study is also an illustration of how better-off, higher-status brokers such as Renato can not only secure but also enhance their status through clientelist relations.

6 Discussion and conclusion

We have ethnographically theorized morality and dependence in the real-life setting of Lápos, by engaging with Mona and Adrian's situated judgements and moral deliberations about how to choose between the different types of dependent relations that are at their disposal in circumstances of their narrow and constrained opportunity structures. Their stories show how violent debt enforcement makes household debtors move from the formal labor market to the informal one to avoid debt enforcement proceedings such as 50 per cent wage garnishment. Their strategies are embedded and re-configure local dependencies and facilitate new types of client-patron relations where informal hierarchical relations with the new patrons (local small entrepreneurs, shop keepers, or informal migrant labor recruiters) are morally approved and used to mitigate the harmful consequences of oppressive and economically violent debt enforcement in which the state is a major player by establishing the legal and institutional regulatory environment for the bailiffs exploitative practice of 'making debt work' (Mikuš, 2020).

The paper demonstrated the need to explore the interplay between morality and political economy if we are to understand the formation of social hierarchy in contexts such as post-socialist rural Hungary. Drawing on the findings of our ethnographic case study and the review of the relevant literature, we argue that illiberalism in present-day Hungary is a particular case of social organization based on rank order. It entails informal hierarchical domination that can relieve the extreme inequalities of contemporary capitalism by offering access to selective solidarity: entitlements, concessions, forms of security, help, welfare, employment opportunity, and valuable information. Personalized relations defined by provision and brokerage are mostly hierarchical, maintained by partners who are in unequal positions of power, influence, and access (even if such partners rarely address this and do not protest these conditions). Clientelism and brokerage involve bridging the gaps between unequal positions of access. Thus, as common organizational patterns in illiberal economic systems, they represent a mode of integration that effectively prevents social unrest resulting from the polarization of wealth and the accompanying sense of social injustice.

Although we are fully aware of the limitation of using one, although explorative case study to build our argument on, we believe that by our thick description (Geertz, 1973) we have shown the mechanism, the pattern, and the workings of hierarchically dependent relations in that one case in rural North Hungary. And as we examined in this paper, this resonates well with scholarship on dependence in other settings. The paper also argues that as the possession and transmission of privilege increasingly involves personalized networks and channels of access (Szelényi & Mihályi, 2019), undoubtedly the case in contemporary Hungary, 're-feudalization' occurs. Following wider trends in southern Europe (Narotzky, 2020), the prospects for upward social mobility and even stable employment in Hungary—at least in certain, economically underdeveloped regions of the country—have become increasingly narrow (Huszár et al., 2022). We are presently witnessing a move toward an increasingly illiberal form of capitalism, in which actors with greater power obtain more privileges and are less affected by competition. This encourages the creation of different status groups and brokerage networks at different scales that promote inequality and dependency, especially (but not only) at the margins of society. However, these clientelist, hierarchical

dependent relations simultaneously have an important role in pacifying social inequalities and class antagonism.

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Convergence or divergence of the digital transformation among European institutional regimes: an Eastern European perspective

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Abstract

This article analyses the socio-economic consequences of technological transformation in Central and Eastern Europe in a comparative perspective. The analysis has been carried out with datasets prepared in the framework of the European comparative research project BEYOND4.0 on the basis of the results of Eurostat's ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) usage in enterprises (isoc_e) and Eurofound's European Working Conditions Surveys (EWCS). Taking into account the social embeddedness of technology, it maps the level of institutional regimes using advanced statistical techniques from econometrics. The article concludes that, in terms of the digital transformation, all European union (EU) countries made progress during the period under review, although there have been considerable differences among institutional regimes.

Keywords: *digital transformation; Europe; institutional regimes; Central and Eastern Europe; convergence; divergence; inequalities*

1 Introduction

The digital transformation, defined as a process entailing the pervasive adoption of digital technologies in production and consumption activities that rely on a significant dimension of data development and data analysis (Goos et al., 2019), is quickly changing the world of work in the developed societies of Europe and North America. The debate around the impact of digitalisation on work has been relatively polarised between pessimistic and optimistic perspectives among academics, practitioners, and policymakers. Pessimistic ones have dominated the debate during the last decade, stressing on the likely effects of automation through job losses and massive technological unemployment (Frey & Osborne, 2017). By contrast, optimistic perspectives have underlined the potential for job creation that can counterbalance job losses, as well as job change, calling for a more nuanced view (Warhurst et al., 2019) to open avenues for reskilling and job change. However, there has recently been increasing evidence (Dhondt et al., 2022; Kornelakis et al., 2022) that technologies are not deterministic but are rather shaped by institutions and actors at different levels with diverse impacts on both labour and employment.

In a context where there is a deficit of empirical research about the deployment of the digital transformation and analyses often are based only on econometric methods, this article aims at filling the gap for the Central and Eastern European region on the basis of recent quantitative research.

Our approach builds on the theoretical perspective that digital technologies are socially embedded (Granovetter, 1985; Warhurst et al., 2019) and their adoption is mediated by institutional, economic, and cultural contexts. Rather than viewing digitalisation as a linear or purely technological process, we situate it within broader institutional frameworks, such as welfare regimes and varieties of capitalism (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Hall & Soskice, 2001), which shape how digital tools are implemented, governed, and diffused. This allows us to examine not only the levels of digital adoption but also the mechanisms of convergence or divergence across country groupings with shared institutional characteristics. This theoretical orientation informs our empirical strategy, which focuses on comparing institutional regimes and member state groupings to understand differentiated trajectories of digital transformation.

For a long time, the European Union's enlargements included countries with relatively equal levels of economic performance (GDP). However, the enlargement that started in 2004 and was followed in 2007 and 2013 added the former socialist states which had been part of the USSR and its satellites. More than 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and 20 years after the 2004 European Union (EU) enlargement, Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries have not been able to catch up with their Western European counterparts economically, including wages and incomes (Delteil & Kirov, 2017). In this context, there have been various theoretical attempts to address the hypothesis of convergence. A strong argument for catching up could be related to the adoption of transformative digital technologies, which can lead to increased GDP (Berger & Frey, 2016; Bukht & Heeks, 2017). In this context, the article addresses the diversity of European countries and institutional regimes to investigate whether there has been a convergence or a divergence of the impacts of digital transformation.

The article is structured as follows. The second section reviews the literature on employment regimes in Europe with a focus on the Eastern European model. The third section outlines the overall research design, the variables, and the data used. The fourth section presents the results, in terms of digital work, learning capacity, training opportunities, task change, and manual handling, systematically comparing old and new member states and the Eastern European model with other European models. The final section discusses the findings.

2 Theoretical considerations

In the context of digital transformation, there has been a lack of consistent data regarding the role of technologies for convergence among European countries (Warhurst et al., 2019). Digitalisation, although not a new phenomenon, presents new considerations in terms of its pace, scope of technological change, and transformative potential (Meil & Kirov, 2017). While there has been a continuous increase in publications on the impacts of digitalisation and the future of work in recent years, the majority of them have focused on Western Europe and North America. Other regions, including Central and Eastern Europe, have remained understudied despite publications of some papers investigating specific aspects of digital transformation, such as platforms (Piasna et al., 2022), or Industry 4.0 in certain sectors (Drahokoupil, 2020). Moreover,

there is an urgent need to improve the evidence based on the actual effects of digitalisation on labour and employment, with a particular weakness being the lack of relevant data.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the transition to free market-oriented capitalist economies with some form of parliamentary democracy was expected to be a rapid process. However, thirty years later and twenty years after the Central and Eastern Europe Countries (CEECs) acceded to the European Union (EU), they have still retained specificities inherited from their socialist past and have yet to resolve all of the challenges faced later in the transition and EU integration processes (Delteil & Kirov, 2017). These developments have allowed for the emergence of a specific Central and Eastern European model, also known as the post-communist states model in various international typologies. For instance, based on employment regime theory and other research (Gallie, 2007; Goergen et al., 2009), five types of institutional regimes have been identified: Nordic, Continental, North-West, Southern European, and Eastern European regimes. Consequently, the question of convergence[1] has regularly emerged in various arenas and spheres, such as work organisation types in Europe (Valeyre et al., 2009) or quality of work (Holman, 2013). There have been discussions about the development of particular sub-models of the eastern-European regime type — for example, Bohle and Greskovits (2012) categorise the capitalist diversity among CEECs into neoliberal (Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania), embedded neoliberal (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia),[2] and corporatist member states (Slovenia) – while the model itself remains relevant for larger comparisons at European level.

Recent efforts of the European Commission to measure digital performance through the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) have partially confirmed the persistent divergence between regions and regimes in terms of overall digital performance and the progress of EU countries in their digital competitiveness (European Commission, 2021). Not surprisingly, companies in CEECs have adopted digital technologies to a lesser degree. With two exceptions, the CEECs have consistently scored below the EU average in terms of digital technology adoption. The countries scoring above the EU average are firstly Estonia, followed by Slovenia. Estonia has become a worldwide success story in terms of digitalisation; yet its digital transformation has been an extended and on-going process over three decades (Kattel & Mergel, 2018). Across most of the region, the adoption of digital technologies lags behind the old member states. A recent comparative analysis between 2015 and 2020 suggests that there are still differences in the level of development of the digital economy and society within the EU, despite all the investments and policies made in recent years (Borowiecki et al., 2021). Moreover, the countries identified as the least digitally developed in earlier studies remained basically the same.

In addition to the deployment of digital technologies in companies, the digital transformation is dependent on the possibility for workers to perform more low-skilled (manual) operations, as further developed in the article.

[1] This convergence has been a preoccupation not only among academics but also a lot of policy makers and stakeholders; see, for example, the Open Society Institute's initiative 'The Catch-Up Index', https://osis.bg/?p=2477&lang=en.

[2] Baltic neoliberalism and Visegrad embedded neoliberalism share their early policy orientation on privatisation, liberalisation, and deregulation aimed at attracting foreign direct investment. However, these countries differ in their approach to making a radical break with the past, regardless of the social costs of preserving some social and welfare policies, in light of neoliberal reforms.

In this context, we pose the following two research questions:

1. Is there a divergence between old and new EU member states and between different institutional regimes in terms of the digital transformation?

2. Is there a convergence of technological transformation regarding certain indicators between old and new EU member states and between different institutional regimes? (*If yes, which ones?*)

3 Data, variables and methods

3.1 Data

The article utilises aggregated data sets from the Beyond 4.0 project's app focusing on both employers and employees (Greenan, 2023b). As described by Greenan (2023b), this empirical tool is 'an original tool based on an application combining data from employer and employee surveys' (p. 5). The indicators are derived from harmonised and pre-processed data, based on average values and regression coefficients, integrating employer data from Eurostat's Community Survey on ICT Usage in Enterprises (isoc_e) (2010; 2014) and employee data from Eurofound's European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) waves 2010 and 2015 (Eurofound et al., 2012, 2017). The Eurostat ICT survey provides harmonised and comparable data on the adoption and use of digital technologies across enterprises with 10 or more employees. The indicators cover key aspects of digital transformation, such as internet connectivity, cloud computing, e-business integration, enterprise resource planning (ERP), customer relationship management (CRM), and the use of social media. Metadata and indicator documentation are available online via Eurostat[3]. The EWCS, conducted by Eurofound, is a cross-sectional survey targeting workers aged 15 and above (in most countries), and collects detailed, representative data on working conditions across Europe. It includes information on job tasks, learning capacity, digitalisation at the workplace, exposure to repetitive work, training opportunities, and other dimensions relevant to labour market transformation. The data are collected through structured interviews and aim to capture workers' experiences and perceptions of their jobs. Further information on the survey methodology and sampling is available on the Eurofound website[4]. Since our analysis relies on these aggregated indicators rather than raw, micro-level EWCS data, individual distributions of the recoded variables are not included within the scope of this article.

However, it is important to note some limitations of the data sets and time frame.

It should be acknowledged that the available EU-level datasets generally lack detailed regional-level data, so the analysis is based on country-level data. The selected time frame (2010-2015) reflects the availability of comparable data. Subsequent methodological changes in the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) after 2020 – including the shift from face-to-face to telephone interviews in the context of Covid-19 – restrict comparability with later waves. Furthermore, since Industry 4.0 is not yet fully established and older waves of technologies are predominantly in use, we selected relatively identical starting and ending years from the available databases to ensure comparability.

[3] Eurostat, ICT usage in enterprises (isoc_e), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/en/isoc_e_esms.htm

[4] Eurofound, European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/european-working-conditions-surveys-ewcs

While the binary categorisation of 'old vs new' member states remains analytically useful, it does not fully capture the heterogeneity within the group of new member states. For example, Malta and Cyprus are included based on accession chronology, but differ significantly from post-socialist Central and Eastern European countries. These limitations are addressed in the construction of the independent variables (see Section 3.2), and both countries are excluded from the subgroup analyses. Finally, the research questions do not address whether disparities among post-socialist countries have increased, decreased, or remained stable over the studied period – an important avenue for future research.

3.2 *Variables*

Table 1 provides a comprehensive list of the variables employed as dependent variables to measure the consequences of digital transformation. In our analyses, we have considered these as the dependent variables because it is assumed they could provide new and systematic insights into the technological transformation (Greenan, 2023a).

As for the **independent variables** (Table 2), we have included two key factors:

1) A country-grouping distinguishing old and new EU member states, with 0 representing old member states as the reference category and 1 representing new member states.

2) A categorical variable representing five types of institutional regime, derived from employment regime theory and other research (Gallie, 2007; Goergen et al., 2009). The reference category is set as 0 for Nordic, 1 for Continental, 2 for North-West, 3 for Southern European, and 4 for Eastern European regimes.

Although the binary categorisation of "old vs new" member states has lost some of its analytical relevance more than two decades after the first major EU enlargement, it remains widely used in contemporary research on convergence and digital transformation. Holobiuc (2021) demonstrates that substantial gaps between new and old member states persisted up to 2019; Boikova et al. (2021) confirm that historical trajectories continue to shape these differences; Brodny and Tutak (2022) identify similar regional disparities in the digitalisation of SMEs; and Mura and Donath (2023) highlight uneven impacts of digitalisation on economic growth across the two groups. We therefore retain the binary division as a macro-analytical benchmark, while acknowledging its limitations, particularly the heterogeneity within the new member states – Malta and Cyprus, for example, do not share the post-socialist legacy of Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC). Future research could apply more nuanced classifications, such as the Bohle and Greskovits (2012) typology, to capture these internal differences more accurately between different groups of CEEC.

3.3 *Methods*

Our analysis of the consequences of digital transformation has employed descriptive statistics and regression modelling. Regression modelling 'is a technique for modelling of relationships between two (or more) variables' (Miles & Shevlin, 2001, p. 10). Specifically, we utilised four models *for each* dependent variable, employing linear regression (Ordinary Least Square regression), which allowed us to interpret the regression coefficients or slopes (b). These coefficients indicate 'the amount of change in the dependent variable ... that we would expect for a change of one unit of the independent variable' (Miles & Shevlin, 2001, p. 18). Models 1 and 2 incorporate a categorical

Table 1 An overview of variables in use within different databases (dependent variables)

EWCS	*Digital work* Composite indicator reflecting the use of digital technologies in employees' daily work tasks, including the use of computers, software, and digital tools. Constructed variable: weighted (from 0 to 6) sum of digital_w*; higher scores indicate more digital work. *Learning capacity* Composite indicator of learning capacity which, on the one hand, synthesizes a number of work organisation practices and structures of work organisation and, on the other, allows for the three levels of analysis (individual, group, and organisational) and their interactions to be considered. *Training opportunities* Constructed variable (combination of on-the-job training and training paid by the employer). *Tasks 'no' change* During the last 12 months, has your work changed in any of the following ways: your tasks and duties? *Repetitive movements* Does your main paid job involve repetitive hand or arm movements? — all of the time. *Manual handling* Does your main paid job involve carrying or moving heavy loads? *Protective equipment* Does your job ever require that you wear personal protective equipment?
ICT	*Total technology indicator* The indicator is composed of five sub-dimensions and relative variables: Connection technology indicator (Enterprises with internet access & Enterprises internet connection — fixed and mobile broadband access); Web and Social Media technology indicator (Enterprises with a website & Enterprises using social networks); E-commerce technology indicator (Enterprises with e-commerce sales & Enterprises purchasing online); E-business technology indicator (Enterprises using software solutions like Customer Relationship Management [CRM] & ERP [Enterprise Resource planning] to share information between different functional areas); Cloud technology (Enterprises who buy only medium CC services — e-mail, office software, file storage, database hosting — & those buying high CC services — accounting software applications, CRM software, computing power). *High CC services* Standardised indicator: Buying high CC services (accounting software applications, CRM software, computing power). *Medium CC services* Standardised indicator: Buying only medium CC services (e-mail, office software, file storage, database hosting)

Source. Greenan et al., 2023b.

variable representing the institutional regimes, where Model 1 corresponds to the first examined year (EWSC 2010; ICT 2010), and Model 2 corresponds to the last examined year (EWCS 2015; ICT 2014). On the other hand, models 3 and 4 include a dummy variable distinguishing between old and new member states, with Model 3 referring to the first examined year (EWSC 2010; ICT 2010) and Model 4 referring to the last examined year (EWCS 2015; ICT 2014).

The regression models were estimated using STATA version 14 on aggregated, country-level data, with countries serving as the units of analysis (n = 27). Due to the small number of observations, the results of the significance tests should be interpreted with caution. These models are primarily intended to identify broad cross-national associations rather than provide strong causal inference. For this reason, the inclusion of additional control variables was limited, as adding further predictors would substantially reduce the degrees of freedom and increase the risk of overfitting. This should be acknowledged as a limitation of the analysis.

Table 2 An overview of country-groupings (independent variables)

Old and new EU member states (European Commission)	The *old ones* (Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Denmark, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Finland, and Sweden); The *new ones* (after 2004: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia).
Based on employment regime theory and other research (Gallie, 2007; Goergen et al., 2009), five types of **institutional regime** can be identified:	*Nordic regimes* (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden); *Continental regimes* (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands); *North-West regimes* (Ireland and the UK); *Southern European regimes* (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Spain); *Eastern European regimes* (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia).

Source. European Commission; Gallie, 2007; Goergen et al., 2009.

4 Results[5]

The results section first analyses the data by old vs. new member states and then by institutional regimes (top-down approach), starting from descriptive statistics and then presenting regression models for each variable of interest.

4.1 Digital work

Digital work increased between 2010 and 2015 across all EU countries, with both old and new member states showing improvement (Table 3), though significant differences persist. While progress is notable among new member states, their 2015 levels still lag behind those of old member states in 2010. This pattern is particularly evident in countries with Southern and Eastern European regimes (Table 4).

Regression analysis indicates that new member states exhibited significantly lower levels of digital work in both 2010 and 2015 compared to old member states. However, the gap narrowed slightly from -6.75 in 2010 ($p < 0.001$) to -5.65 in 2015 ($p < 0.01$), indicating modest convergence (Figure 1).

Digital work levels also varied across institutional regimes with statistically significant differences observed for Southern and Eastern European regimes when compared with Nordic regimes. In particular, Southern and Eastern European regimes scored consistently lower than Nordic regimes (Figure 1). In 2010, the gap with the Nordic group was -7.28 for Southern regimes ($p < 0.01$) and -10.38 for Eastern regimes ($p < 0.001$). These differences remained relatively stable in 2015 (-7.79 for Southern regimes, $p < 0.01$, and -10.46 for Eastern regimes, $p < 0.001$, respectively), highlighting

[5] The categorical dummy variables are the frequencies of the respective categories, and the continuous variables are proxies for answers to these questions at country level.

Table 3 Difference between 2010 and 2015 in digital work by old vs. new member states

		2010	2015	Difference between 2010 and 2015
		Mean	*Mean*	
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	2.650442	2.839097	0.1887
Old and new member states	**Old member states**	2.9638	3.1014	0.1376
	New member states	2.2889	2.5365	0.2476

Table 4 Difference between 2010 and 2015 in digital work by institutional regime

		2010	2015	Difference between 2010 and 2015
		Mean	*Mean*	
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	2.650442	2.839097	0.1887
Institutional regime	**Nordic regimes**	3.2037	3.4128	0.2092
	Continental regimes	3.0870	3.2229	0.1359
	North-West regimes	3.3409	3.4820	0.1411
	Southern European regimes	2.5183	2.6990	0.1807
	Eastern European regimes	2.2080	2.4328	0.2248

persistent institutional disparities in digital work intensity.

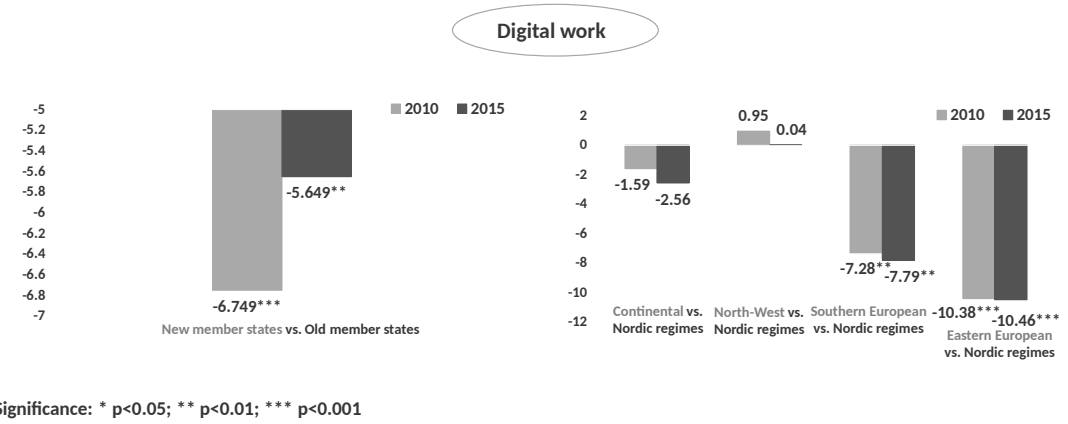

Figure 1 Linear regression coefficients of digital work in 2010 and 2015 by country-groupings

4.2 Learning capacity

Between 2010 and 2015, learning capacity remained largely stagnant in new member states, with a slight negative trend observed in some cases (Table 5). This is especially

true for countries in the Eastern and Southern European regimes (Table 6). While Nordic regime countries did not show progress during this period, they maintained the highest levels of learning capacity. Notably, by 2015, countries in Continental and Southern regimes had not yet reached the Nordic levels observed in 2010.

Table 5 Difference between 2010 and 2015 in learning capacity by old vs. new member states

		2010	2015	Difference between 2010 and 2015
		Mean	*Mean*	
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	**0.5589**	**0.5573**	**-0.0016**
Old and new member states	**Old member states**	0.5734	0.5748	0.0014
	New member states	0.5421	0.5371	-0.0050

Table 6 Difference between 2010 and 2015 in learning capacity by institutional regime

		2010	2015	Difference between 2010 and 2015
		Mean	*Mean*	
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	0.5589	0.5573	-0.0016
Institutional regime	**Nordic regimes**	0.6511	0.6329	-0.0182
	Continental regimes	0.5563	0.5716	0.0153
	North-West regimes	0.6268	0.6335	0.0067
	Southern European regimes	0.5384	0.5237	-0.0147
	Eastern European regimes	0.5340	0.5335	-0.0006

Regression results indicate no statistically significant differences in learning capacity between old and new member states in either 2010 or 2015. However, institutional regime differences were pronounced and stable across both years, particularly for the Southern and Eastern European regimes, which consistently lagged behind the Nordic regime. The gap between Continental and Nordic regimes slightly narrowed over time, decreasing from -0.10 ($p < 0.001$) to -0.07 ($p < 0.05$) (Figure 2). Compared with Nordic regimes, Southern European regimes scored significantly lower in both 2010 (-0.12, $p < 0.001$) and 2015 (-0.12, $p < 0.001$), while Eastern European regimes also showed significantly lower levels in 2010 (-0.12, $p < 0.001$) and 2015 (-0.11, $p < 0.001$). No significant differences were found for North-West regime countries.

4.3 Training opportunities

Descriptive statistics

Between 2010 and 2015, training opportunities slightly increased for both old and new member states, with the latter showing more pronounced improvement (Table 7). When analysed by institutional regime, countries in the North-West group recorded

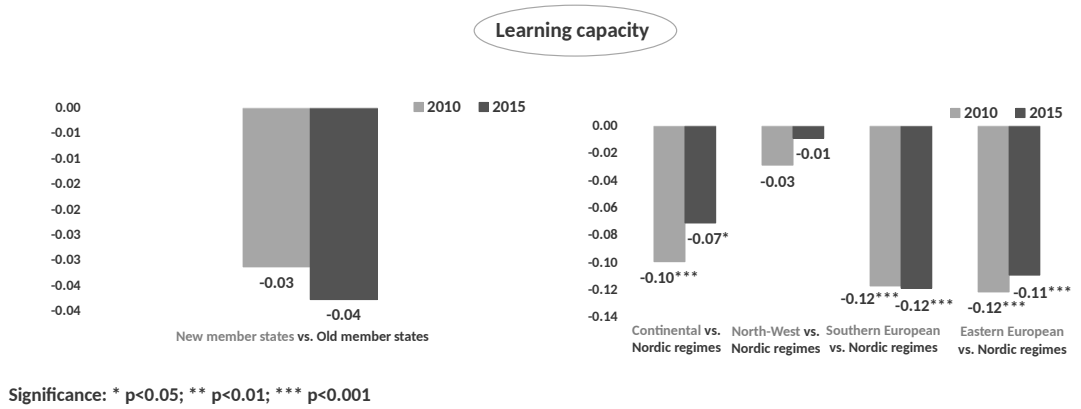

Figure 2 Linear regression coefficients of learning capacity in 2010 and 2015 by country-groupings

the highest increase, while those in the Nordic and Continental regimes experienced a slight decline (Table 8).

Table 7 Difference between 2010 and 2015 in training opportunities by old vs. new member states

		2010	2015	Difference between 2010 and 2015
		Mean	*Mean*	
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	0.4101	0.4284	0.0183
Old and new member states	**Old member states**	0.4363	0.4381	0.0018
	New member states	0.3798	0.4172	0.0374

Table 8 Difference between 2010 and 2015 on training opportunities by institutional regime

		2010	2015	Difference between 2010 and 2015
		Mean	*Mean*	
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	0.4101	0.4284	0.0183
Institutional regime	**Nordic regimes**	0.5787	0.5755	-0.0032
	Continental regimes	0.4321	0.4188	-0.0133
	North-West regimes	0.5355	0.6353	0.0998
	Southern European regimes	0.3133	0.3352	0.0218
	Eastern European regimes	0.3820	0.4067	0.0247

Regression analyses show no statistically significant differences in training opportunities between old and new member states for either 2010 or 2015. However, insti-

tutional regime differences were observed, particularly when comparing Continental, Southern and Eastern European regimes with the Nordic regime. Compared to the Nordic regime (used as reference), training opportunities remained lower in Continental regimes in both 2010 (-0.13, $p < 0.05$) and 2015 (-0.15, $p < 0.05$), Southern European regimes in both 2010 (-0.25, $p < 0.001$) and 2015 (-0.24, $p < 0.001$), and Eastern European regimes in both 2010 (-0.18, $p < 0.01$) and 2015 (-0.16, $p < 0.01$). No statistically significant differences were found for North-West regime countries in either year. Overall, the coefficients suggest a relatively stable pattern across the two years, rather than a substantial change over time (Figure 3).

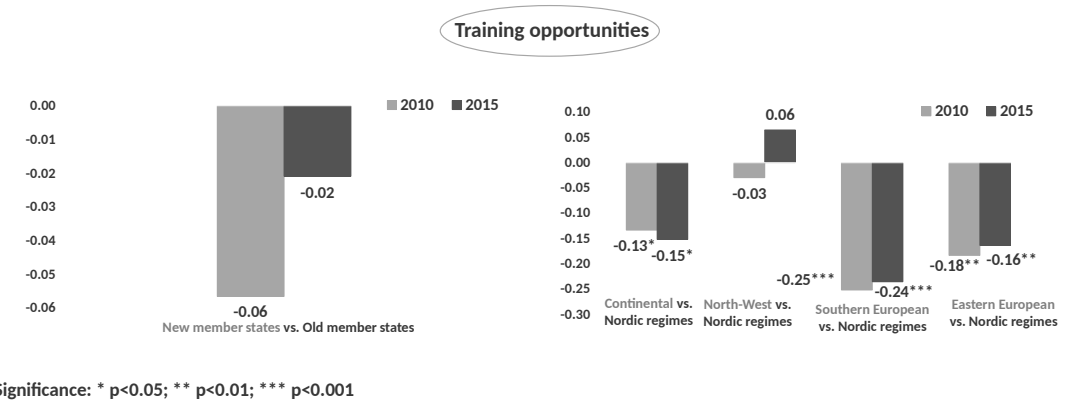

Figure 3 Linear regression coefficients of training opportunities in 2010 and 2015 by country-groupings

4.4 Task 'no' change

In 2015, a higher proportion of individuals from the new member states reported having received no new tasks or duties in the past 12 months compared to individuals from the old member states (Table 9). This pattern was more prominent in countries belonging to Southern European regimes and Eastern European regimes (Table 10).

Table 9 Task 'no' change by old and new member states, 2015

2015		
Mean		
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	0.6104
Old and new member states	**Old member states**	0.6003
	New member states	0.6219

Regression results support these observations, showing that individuals in Southern European (0.14, $p < 0.05$) and Eastern European (0.13, $p < 0.05$) regimes were more likely to report no change in tasks compared to individuals in Nordic regimes in 2015 (Figure 4).

Table 10 Task 'no' change by institutional regime, 2015

2015		
Mean		
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	0.6104
Institutional regime	**Nordic regimes**	0.4874
	Continental regimes	0.6029
	North-West regimes	0.5277
	Southern European regimes	0.6553
	Eastern European regimes	0.6385



Significance: * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

Figure 4 Linear regression coefficients of task 'no' change, manual handling, repetitive movements, or protective equipment in 2010 and 2015 by country-groupings

4.5 Manual handling

Overall, the prevalence of jobs involving manual handling (carrying or moving heavy loads) declined between 2010 and 2015 across both old and new member states (Table 11). This downward trend was particularly visible in countries with Continental, North-Western, and Eastern European regimes. In contrast, an increase in manual handling was observed in countries classified under Nordic and Southern European regimes during the same period (Table 12).

Table 11 Difference between 2010 and 2015 in manual handling by old vs. new member states

		2010	**2015**	**Difference between 2010 and 2015**
		Mean	*Mean*	
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	2.8023	2.7701	-0.0322
Old and new member states	**Old member states**	2.7218	2.7132	-0.0086
	New member states	2.8952	2.8356	-0.0595

Regression results broadly align with the descriptive findings. In both 2010 and 2015, individuals in Southern European regimes were more likely to report engaging in manual handling tasks compared to those in Nordic regimes (12.23, $p < 0.01$ in 2010 and 13.53, $p < 0.001$ in 2015). For Eastern European regimes, a statistically significant

Table 12 Difference between 2010 and 2015 in manual handling by institutional regime

		2010	2015	Difference between 2010 and 2015
		Mean	*Mean*	
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	2.8023	2.7701	-0.0322
Institutional regime	**Nordic regimes**	2.0516	2.1636	0.1120
	Continental regimes	2.8055	2.7084	-0.0971
	North-West regimes	2.3672	2.2997	-0.0675
	Southern European regimes	3.2848	3.4181	0.1333
	Eastern European regimes	2.8212	2.7012	-0.1200

difference compared with the Nordic group was observed only in 2010 (7.60, $p < 0.01$), while by 2015 this difference was no longer significant (Figure 4).

4.6 Repetitive hand or arm movements and protective equipment

The proportion of jobs involving repetitive hand or arm movements throughout the entire working day slightly declined between 2010 and 2015 in both old and new member states (Table 13). This downward trend was observed in countries classified under Continental, Southern, and Eastern European regimes. By contrast, countries in the Nordic and North-Western regime groups experienced a slight increase in such jobs over the same period (Table 14).

Table 13 Difference between 2010 and 2015 in repetitive hand or arm movements by old vs. new member states

		2010	2015	Difference between 2010 and 2015
		Mean	*Mean*	
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	.2015	.1823	-0.0193
Old and new member states	**Old member states**	.1946	.1826	-0.0120
	New member states	.2096	.1819	-0.0277

In 2010, individuals in Southern European regimes were more likely to report jobs involving repetitive hand or arm movements compared with individuals in Nordic regimes (0.09, $p < 0.05$). No statistically significant regime differences were observed for this indicator in 2015. (Figure 4).

As for the use of personal protective equipment, the regression results indicate no statistically significant differences across country groupings for either 2010 or 2015 or over time (Figure 4).

Table 14 Difference between 2010 and 2015 in repetitive hand or arm movements by institutional regime

		2010	2015	Difference between 2010 and 2015
		Mean	*Mean*	
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	.2015	.1823	-0.0193
Institutional regime	**Nordic regimes**	.1582	.1591	0.0010
	Continental regimes	.1783	.1740	-0.0043
	North-West regimes	.1847	.1892	0.0045
	Southern European regimes	.2376	.2154	-0.0222
	Eastern European regimes	.2095	.1738	-0.0357

4.7 Total technology indicator

The total technology indicator increased between 2010 and 2014 in both old and new EU member states, reflecting overall technological advancement (Table 15). While all institutional regimes recorded progress, countries classified under Southern and Eastern European regimes notably reached - and in some cases surpassed - the 2010 levels of countries with Nordic regimes by 2014 (Table 16). This trend suggests gradual technological catching-up by lagging regions.

Table 15 Difference between 2010 and 2014 in the total technology indicator by old vs. new member states

		2010	2014	Difference between 2010 and 2014
		Mean	*Mean*	
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	0.3919	0.5582	0.1662
Old and new member states	**Old member states**	0.4332	0.6010	0.1678
	New member states	0.3443	0.5087	0.1644

Regression analysis indicates the persistence of statistically significant differences between new and old member states, with the total technology indicator remaining significantly lower in new member states in both years (-0.09, $p < 0.001$ in 2010; -0.09, $p < 0.05$ in 2014).

When grouped by institutional regimes, countries with Southern and Eastern European regimes consistently lagged behind Nordic regimes. Compared with Nordic regimes, Southern European regimes scored significantly lower in both 2010 (-0.11, $p < 0.01$) and 2014 (-0.17, $p < 0.01$), while Eastern European regimes also showed significantly lower levels in 2010 (-0.16, $p < 0.001$) and 2014 (-0.21, $p < 0.001$). Continental regimes differed significantly from Nordic regimes only in 2014 (-0.10, $p < 0.05$), while no statistically significant differences were found for North-West regimes in either year. Moreover, the gap widened over time for Southern and Eastern European regimes, indicating a possible widening of technological disparities relative to

Table 16 Difference between 2010 and 2014 in the total technology indicator by institutional regime

		2010	2014	Difference between 2010 and 2014
		Mean	*Mean*	
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	0.3919	0.5582	0.1662
Institutional regime	**Nordic regimes**	0.4831	0.7258	0.2427
	Continental regimes	0.4349	0.5993	0.1644
	North-West regimes	0.4379	0.6097	0.1717
	Southern European regimes	0.3876	0.5304	0.1427
	Eastern European regimes	0.3376	0.4958	0.1582

the Nordic regime (Figure 5).

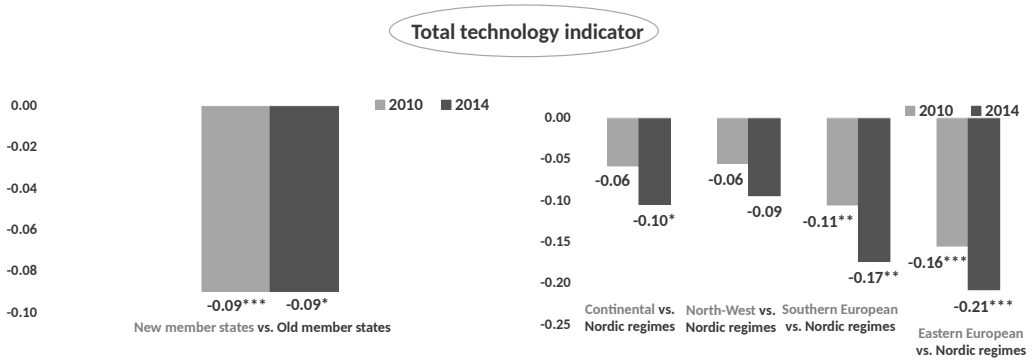

Figure 5 Linear regression coefficients of the total technology indicator in 2010 and 2014 by country-groupings

4.8 High CC services

Between 2010 and 2014, both old and new EU member states increased their purchases of high cloud computing (CC) services, including accounting software, CRM systems, and computing power (Table 17). Despite this growth, companies in old member states were purchasing such services at twice the rate of those in new member states by 2014. By institutional regime, Nordic countries led in the uptake of high CC services, followed by North-West, Continental, Southern, and Eastern European regimes (Table 18). This intensive investment, particularly by more advanced regimes, marked a turning point in the digitalisation trajectory during the mid-2010s.

Regression results for 2014 indicate these differences: new member states reported significantly lower purchases of high CC services compared to old member states (-0.11, $p < 0.01$). Differences by institutional regime were also marked, with all non-Nordic regimes scoring significantly lower than Nordic regimes: Continental regimes (-0.21, $p < 0.001$), North-West regimes (-0.17, $p < 0.05$), Southern European regimes (-0.26, $p < 0.001$), and Eastern European regimes (-0.27, $p < 0.001$) (Figure 6), indicating persistent disparities in access to advanced digital tools.

Table 17 Difference between 2010 and 2014 in high CC services by old vs. new member states

		2010	2014	Difference between 2010 and 2014
		Mean	*Mean*	
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	0.0149	0.1759	0.1610
Old and new member states	**Old member states**	0.0149	0.2253	0.2103
	New member states	0.0149	0.1190	0.1040

Table 18 Difference between 2010 and 2014 in high CC services by institutional regime

		2010	2014	Difference between 2010 and 2014
		Mean	*Mean*	
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	0.0149	0.1759	0.1610
Institutional regime	**Nordic regimes**	0.0149	0.4179	0.4030
	Continental regimes	0.0149	0.1791	0.1642
	North-West regimes	0.0149	0.2197	0.2048
	Southern European regimes	0.0149	0.1362	0.1212
	Eastern European regimes	0.0149	0.1219	0.1070

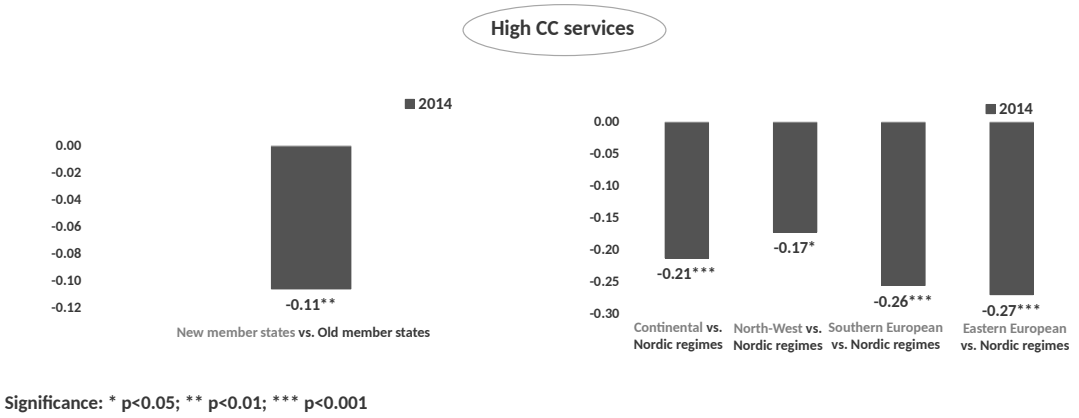

Figure 6 Linear regression coefficients of high CC services in 2014 by country-groupings

4.9 Medium CC services

Between 2010 and 2014, purchases of medium cloud computing (CC) services - including e-mail, office software, file storage, and enterprise database hosting - increased across both old and new member states (Table 19). The pattern closely mirrors that observed for high CC services. At the regime level, countries in the North-West group reported the highest uptake, followed by Nordic, Southern, Continental, and Eastern European regimes (Table 20), revealing persistent differences in access to basic digital infrastructure.

Table 19 Difference between 2010 and 2014 in medium CC services by old vs. new member states

		2010	2014	Difference between 2010 and 2014
		Mean	*Mean*	
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	0.0213	0.1866	0.1653
Old and new member states	**Old member states**	0.0213	0.2333	0.2121
	New member states	0.0213	0.1326	0.1113

Table 20 Difference between 2010 and 2014 in medium CC services by institutional regime

		2010	2014	Difference between 2010 and 2014
		Mean	*Mean*	
TOTAL	**Average level in EU**	0.0213	0.1866	0.1653
Institutional regime	**Nordic regimes**	0.0213	0.3089	0.2876
	Continental regimes	0.0213	0.1775	0.1562
	North-West regimes	0.0213	0.3132	0.2920
	Southern European regimes	0.0213	0.2208	0.1995
	Eastern European regimes	0.0213	0.1164	0.0951

Regression analysis for 2014 indicates a statistically significant gap between old and new member states in the adoption of medium CC services, with new member states scoring significantly lower than old member states (-0.10, $p < 0.01$). These differences are further reflected across regimes: countries in Eastern and Continental European regimes show statistically significantly lower adoption levels compared to those in Nordic regimes (Continental regimes: -0.11, $p < 0.05$; Eastern European regimes: -0.17, $p < 0.01$) (Figure 7), although the pattern is less uniform than for high CC services, as no statistically significant differences were found for North-West and Southern European regimes..

Taken together, the results indicate that while digital transformation has progressed across the EU between 2010 and 2015, significant disparities persist. Some convergence is visible in digital work and learning capacity, but gaps remain in training opportunities and technology adoption. Countries with Nordic and North-Western regimes consistently outperform those with Southern and Eastern regimes, suggesting aims to the enduring influence of institutional configurations.

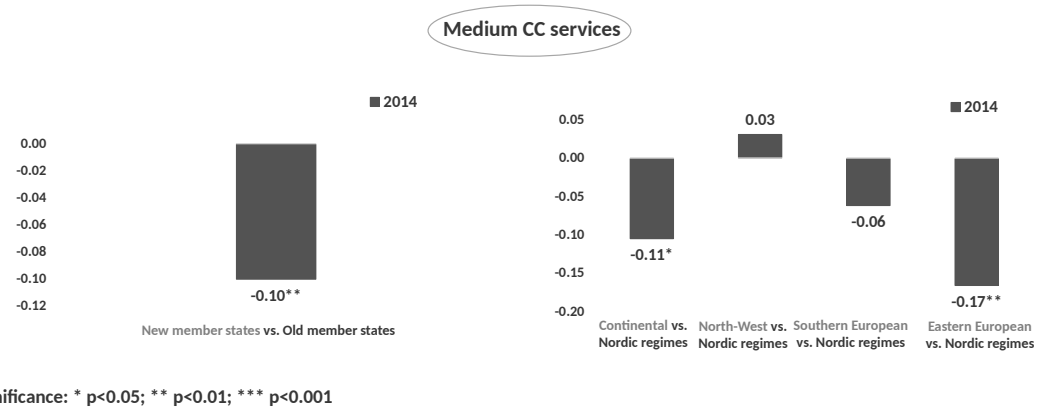

Figure 7 Linear regression coefficients of medium CC services in 2014 by country-groupings

5 Conclusion and discussion

Our analysis indicates that, in terms of the digital transformation, all EU countries made progress during the examined period. However, the more advanced countries, particularly old EU member states and those with Nordic regimes, have been advancing at a faster pace compared to others. The factors that might explain this phenomenon relate to economic structure and to the early involvement of Nordic and North-Western countries in the process of digital transformation and modernisation. These results are consistent with previous findings that the positive effects of digital technology are not observable in the absence of a favourable environment and conditions (such as necessary qualifications among the labour force, adequate organisational systems, the restructuring of public administrative systems, etc.) (Grigorescu et al., 2020). A major barrier for further regional development could be the people who have been excluded from the labour market, the welfare state – as underlined by Illéssy □t al. (2024) – or simply digital literacy (Kornelakis et al., 2022).

However, the analysis has also demonstrated a certain convergence between old and new member states in terms of digital work. Regarding the total technology indicator, we can observe consistent differences over time between old and new member states.

Our analysis shows that there have been significant and stable differences over time regarding training opportunities according to institutional regime, except in North-West countries. The results for training opportunities being most developed in the North-West are consistent with Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova's findings (2021), which examine indicators of enterprise engagement and training paid for by enterprises.

Furthermore, there has been a convergence between institutional regimes in terms of learning capacity, with the disparity between all institutional regimes (except for Southern European) and the Nordic one narrowing in 2015 compared to 2010. This suggests that a common learning culture is emerging across all European countries. However, our analysis also reveals more pronounced differences among institutional regimes, shedding light on some inequalities that are not apparent when using a narrow binary division of countries (old vs. new).

While the differences between old and new member states persist, we also wanted

to assess the evolution of the different regions. Not surprisingly, Southern European and Eastern European regimes appear quite similar to each other across many indicators, particularly in comparison to other regimes. This could be attributed to the significant presence of multinational companies in these countries, as well as the integration of local companies (e.g., SMEs) in global value chains, but also to particular patterns related to investment in technologies and skills.

Returning to our initial research questions – whether there has been convergence or divergence in the digital transformation across EU member states and institutional regimes, and which factors have shaped these trajectories – the findings suggest a nuanced picture. While overall digitalisation levels have increased across the EU, the pace and depth of change differ considerably between country groupings. Some convergence is observed in digital work and learning capacity, yet persistent and in some cases widening gaps remain in technology adoption and training opportunities. These differences are shaped not only by institutional regime, but also by broader structural and historical factors, such as the presence of multinational firms, integration into global value chains, and national investment patterns. This underscores the continued relevance of differentiated policy approaches.

These findings indicate that there is a major policy problem and, if the EU aims to facilitate convergence, there should be stronger and more targeted policy instruments in place to fill the gaps.

To address these disparities, several policy directions emerge from our findings. First, EU cohesion and digitalisation policies should prioritise targeted investment in lagging regions – particularly in Eastern and Southern Europe – through programmes that strengthen both infrastructure and workforce skills. Second, sector-specific strategies are needed to accelerate digital transformation among SMEs and low-digital-intensity industries. Third, inclusive training and upskilling programmes must ensure equal access to digital competencies for older workers, women, and other groups at risk of exclusion. Finally, fostering stronger coordination between national and regional institutions can improve the effectiveness of digital policy implementation and support long-term convergence across institutional regimes.

Building on these results, future research could explore more granular typologies, particularly within the group of post-socialist countries. For example, the classification by Bohle and Greskovits (2012), which distinguishes between neoliberal, embedded neoliberal, and neo-corporatist types, could reveal institutional and developmental differences not captured by our current grouping. Additionally, further studies could investigate the role of governance, investment strategies, and national policy responses in shaping the pace and character of digital convergence across EU regions. These directions could offer more targeted insights into the diverse pathways of digital transformation. In addition, future research could benefit from access to micro-level datasets that would enable the application of more advanced statistical techniques. The use of non-linear models and interaction terms could help capture the complex dynamics of digital transformation across countries and institutional regimes. Such approaches would make it possible to assess how institutional configurations interact with structural variables, such as sectoral composition, enterprise size, or workforce characteristics, in shaping convergence or divergence patterns.

The analysis also includes some limitations. We acknowledge that the country-groupings are useful for a macro analysis, but there could be differences between countries in the same group. This further justifies the exploration of alternative typologies,

such as that of Bohle and Greskovits (2012), in future research. Additionally, while the binary categorisation of 'old vs new' member states remains analytically useful, it does not fully reflect internal heterogeneity. Malta and Cyprus, for example, do not share the post-socialist legacy of Central and Eastern European countries and were included in the 'new member states' group solely due to the timing of their accession. Therefore, our subgroup analyses exclude these two countries. Finally, the research questions do not examine whether disparities among post-socialist countries have increased, decreased, or remained stable over the study period – an important avenue for future research. Due to the aggregated structure of our data, we are not able to explore sectoral variations in digital adaptation. However, this remains an important avenue for future research, especially considering the varying pace of digitalisation across industry sectors and national contexts.

The results emphasise the social and institutional shaping of technologies, highlighting the role of various stakeholders at different levels driving the digital transformation (Warhurst et al., 2019). Further research could explore the policy implications and provide specific recommendations for European countries and regions, especially those lagging behind in digital transformation efforts.

While our empirical analysis is based on data from 2010–2015, recent Eurostat statistics (2023–2024) confirm the persistence of digital divides across EU countries and institutional regimes (Eurostat, 2025). For example, the uptake of advanced technologies such as AI, cloud computing, and data analytics remains considerably lower in Eastern European countries compared to Nordic and Western countries. Only 6 per cent of SMEs in Bulgaria reached very high digital intensity in 2024, compared to 18 per cent in Finland. These updated figures suggest that the structural and institutional factors identified in our study continue to shape digital transformation outcomes. Our findings can therefore serve as a relevant benchmark for assessing progress toward the EU's 2030 Digital Decade targets.

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Narcoarchy:
Opium as the source of hegemony

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Amitav Ghosh: Smoke and Ashes. Opium's Hidden Histories. John Murray, 2024. 397p, £22

On November 16, 2024, Joe Biden and Xi Jinping attended the third (and last) US-China presidential summit under the Biden administration, which could be seen as a follow-up event to a similar meeting in mid-November 2023. The presidential readout published by the White House underlined the need for "responsibly managed competition," the current buzzword in US-China relations, and reflected on the areas of cooperation. One of these areas that President Biden prioritized is counternarcotics. Seemingly, *control over narcotics* is of utmost concern for the global hegemon; the US is even ready to enhance great-power coordination with its greatest competitor, China, in this area. According to the readout: "On counternarcotics, both sides affirmed the importance of continued coordinated law enforcement actions, information exchanges to identify new and emerging drug trends, and regulatory actions. President Biden welcomed the PRC's scheduling of 55 dangerous synthetic drugs and precursor chemicals, closure of online platforms and companies that supply precursor chemicals, and arrests connected to the illicit chemical industry, and he called for additional steps in the period ahead." The immediate context of these efforts against drug trafficking is manifest in the high demand for synthetic opioids and precursor chemicals (of which China is the world's leading producer) in the US. The flourishing of the illegal drug trade, especially of illegally produced fentanyl, can be directly connected to America's prescription opioids crisis (such as the painkiller *OxyContin*, produced by Purdue Pharma) and the related overdoses that occurred between the 1990s and 2020. The origins of the crisis are rooted deeply in the inner tensions in the structure of American society, such as the tendency for health insurers to refuse to pay for costly regenerative treatments; thus, patients with chronic pain may easily end up being the victims of the aggressive marketing strategies of pharmaceutical companies such as Purdue Pharma, owned by the wealthy and powerful Sackler family, who persuaded physicians to prescribe highly addictive opioid-based painkillers. Nevertheless, the dominant framing of counternarcotics is still centered on the illegal activities of foreigners or people of color, completely diminishing the very real role of the Sackler family and the managers of Purdue Pharma in the opioid crisis, as well as the historical role of privileged upper-class white Americans in drug trafficking.

This is exactly one of the key points of reference in Amitav Ghosh's *Smoke and Ashes. Opium's Hidden Histories*. This book is a summary of the archival and historical re-

search done by Ghosh for his acclaimed historical fiction on the Opium War, the *Ibis trilogy*. Unsurprisingly, the historical analysis presented in *Smoke and Ashes* also revolves around the complex relations of the Guangzhou-Calcutta-London and New York axis during the nineteenth century.

The book covers many aspects of international relations, as Ghosh gives a detailed account of the often overlooked social, economic, and cultural exchanges that arose from both colonial and commercial cosmopolitanism, as well as their continuing effects. In this review, I focus mainly on *how a specific narcotic substance*, i.e., opium, *was able to reinforce or undermine global hierarchies*. Ghosh sees opium not only as an instrument of power, but also as a historical actor in its own right. He highlights that opium plays an ambiguous role in human history: it has been with us since ancient times as a medical substance, but because of its extremely destructive power, it tends to contribute to the rise and fall of powerful socio-political constellations in cyclical waves. Furthermore, despite the abundant historical encounters with the might of opium, various embodiments of the substance have always posed challenges to states and to systems of governance. This potency is expressed in the neologism – *narcoarchy* – I introduce in the title.

The book starts with the well-known context of the Opium War: everything began with the British addiction to Chinese tea. By the end of the eighteenth century, tea had become the national drink of the British Empire and, as such, the prime source of revenue of the British East India Company. However, intensive trade relations with China – being among the top four trading partners of Britain – created a balance-of-trade problem for the British economy, since Chinese merchants were more interested in silver than any other foreign product. The British resorted to tried-and-tested imperial practices to stop the bullion outflow: 1) the long-term plan was to replace tea production in colonial India by simply stealing *Camellia sinensis* and the knowledge of the Chinese on how to cultivate the plant properly, and in the meantime, 2) commercial warfare, based on the circulation of opium in Southeast Asia and China. Opium was first used as a strategic resource by the Dutch merchants of the Indian Ocean, who realized that there was a market for *chandu*, or smoking opium in East Asia, and that because of the addictive nature of the substance, demand would grow exponentially once supplies were made available. After 1830, when the British Empire began to flood China with opium, *the opium scheme became an instrument of state policy*. This "economic policy" turned out to be a great success since "it solved the East India Company's balance of payments problem" (p. 257). To guarantee supply, the British East India Company set up a highly racialized mode of opium production, enforcing a system of unfree labor on the farmers of East India; furthermore, they established the Calcutta-based Opium Department, which was devoted entirely to the control and surveillance of the production and distribution process of the drug. After the expansion of the opium market, native business communities of the western and central Indian Malwa region entered the industry too: ironically, "clandestine opium trade thus became an instrument of resistance, a means of preventing the colonial power from appropriating a vitally important source of income" (p. 109).

Ghosh offers a detailed description of the supply chain: "[O]pium was administered through the so-called 'farm' system, wherein the right to import raw opium belonged solely to the colonial authorities; the rights to process and sell the drug were periodically auctioned off to local bidders. [...and the place] where the raw opium was distilled into smokeable *chandu* was the farm [many of them located in Singa-

pore and the island of Java]" (p. 155–156). Interestingly, most of the opium farms in Southeast Asia were run by diasporic Chinese syndicates, whose consumers were also largely Chinese plantation workers and miners. Hence, opium "became a very important source of capital accumulation for diasporic Chinese elites in Southeast Asia" (p. 157), or the so-called "bamboo network," which later (in the 1980s) invested heavily in the People's Republic of China, thus contributing to its unprecedented economic development. This insight underlines Amitav Ghosh's argument that *the history of global capitalism is strongly intertwined with the history and the development of the opium trade*, the success of which depended on coerced labor, smuggling, and black markets.

However, undeniably, the most obvious beneficiaries of the commercial activity centered around opium were the Western imperial powers, since an indispensable share of the revenue of the British, the Dutch, and the French empires was generated by the opium trade. Post-colonial studies have long drawn attention to the exploitative practices of classical imperialism and to the observation that the more economically fruitful (i.e., cruel, oppressive, and morally questionable) the socio-economic practices of this period were, the more intellectual capital was mobilized to legitimize and normalize them. Ghosh, deploying a high level of intellectual sensitivity about colonial knowledge production, reviews opium trade-related imperial discourses. Accordingly, one of the discursive strategies of the Dutch and the British was the denial of responsibility for the proliferation of the drug trade in Southeast Asia and China. That strategy rested on false arguments about the inherent weakness of native character, and on the related claim that merchants merely fulfilled existing native demand for the substance. Another strategy of concealment was the propagation of *the myth of free trade,* which was regularly promoted by colonial officials who claimed that *any attempt to regulate the flow of opium was completely futile because of the divine rationality of the invisible hand*. Of course, as highlighted by Ghosh, freedom of trade for Western powers was guaranteed, in most cases, through violent means, since business opportunities and favorable market conditions were created by the armed forces of the colonial empires.

Nevertheless, the "China trade" was not just a playground for imperial great powers; the proliferating opium traffic was seen as a promising business opportunity by the emerging American economic elites as well. The second largest beneficiary of the opium trade was the United States. Opium revenues had an immense impact on American national development during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, since the young economy of the newly independent country desperately needed trade partners and capital. Relying on academic resources and archival research, Ghosh has insightfully reconstructed how venerable families of the American elite, such as the Forbes, the Peabody, and the Delano families, were involved in the opium trade. Since American merchants were excluded from the market controlled by the British East India Company, they bought the relatively cheap raw opium from Izmir, Turkey; thus, they could bring opium to the Chinese market at a competitive price. The business flourished so well that American merchants quickly monopolized the shipping of Izmir opium to China, and by the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century, American commercial activity was responsible for one-third of the opium consumed in China.

American businessmen and officials, the Guangzhou-based Russell and Co. – the company that served as the center of the American opium trade to China – did not develop legitimizing ideologies about the drug traffic they maintained, but applied other

strategies to attempt to offset the fact that they inflicted harm on other peoples: they deployed a great missionary zeal in China and became eager Christians and morally impeccable citizens back home; additionally, they never discussed the real source of their fortunes. "Essentially it was because colonialism had created a structure of power in which Euro-descended elites and their allies among Euro-adjacent diasporic groups enjoyed absolute dominance [...] that virtuous young Americans could commit their crimes in faraway countries and return with whitewashed hands to their homes to be celebrated as heroes for their role in building the American economy" (p. 210).

Thus, undoubtedly, of all the actors that provided the Chinese market with a seemingly unlimited opium supply, some maintained drug trafficking networks as a form of imperial economic policy that kept the balance of trade constantly on the positive side, while others rapidly enriched themselves and invested the accumulated capital in the domestic development of their country. Meanwhile, the Qing Empire, which represented the demand side in this thriving trade, faced a multidimensional crisis in the nineteenth century. The main factors in this crisis include the militarily burdensome encounter with the West (defeat in the First Opium War); the unstoppable influx of opium, which created unfixable breaches in the bureaucratic system of the paternalistic state, the effectiveness of which was a source of legitimacy for the imperial court; and the resulting domestic political crisis, which immediately manifested in the Taiping Rebellion, an upheaval against the Qing. Furthermore, on the societal level, opium addiction destabilized the traditional Confucian family, the base of Chinese society, and consequently, the sense of Chinese (civilizational) exceptionalism, as well as the world economic centrality of the Chinese empire, was deeply undermined.

Amitav Ghosh reconstructs the different actors' positions, their gains or losses, and reveals the central role opium played in Western powers' penetration of world markets and in the advancement of global capitalism. However, I think we can confidently assert that what is described by Ghosh – in a somewhat mystifying manner – as the *historical agency of the substance* (opium), i.e., its power to raise and destroy socio-political formations, is in fact an example of how capitalism works. If we recall how Marx described the general law of capitalistic accumulation, it is easy to see the parallel, as he noted in the first volume of Capital: "[A]ccumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole." And since economic might is the basis of political and military power, from there it is only a minor step to a maxim of great-power politics based on the narrative presented by Ghosh: *control over drug use and rule*; this may be the essence of a narcoarchy.

In *Smoke and Ashes. Opium's Hidden Histories,* Amitav Ghosh connects the nineteenth-century opium crisis to the multidimensional crisis of the opioid epidemic in the US. Unsurprisingly, the uncontrollable surge in the use of synthetic opioids (among the white urban lower-middle class) cannot be separated from the mechanisms of the global capitalist system and the ongoing power struggles of international politics. Besides the role of Big Pharma in popularizing prescription opioids in the 1990s, the backdrop to the consecutive waves of the opioid epidemic was the financial crisis of 2008 and its long-term effects, such as the economic restructuring that resulted in massive unemployment in the heartlands of the United States. The regions most affected by the cutbacks were home to a relatively high number of traumatized young people who had returned from overseas military interventions conducted under the banner of the "War on Terror." The debatable success of this

international adventurism and the structural transformations of the international system, mainly the rise of China, have gradually eroded people's sense of exceptionalism and primacy, which were traditionally crucial aspects of American identity.

Some argue that Donald J. Trump's second presidency is partly due to his political discourse that addresses the effects of this "multidimensional crisis." The American opioid epidemic is still far from resolved; even after the sea change in politics, counternarcotics remain one of the items at the top of the agenda. On 1 February 2025, Donald J. Trump announced that the American government would impose tariffs on imports from Canada, China, and Mexico; he claimed that the rationale for the tariffs was partly the health crisis caused by drugs, such as the "deadly fentanyl" flowing from/through those countries to the US. Control of drug use is arguably still a central element of power politics.

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