

Precarization of work and employment in the light of competitive Europeanization and the fragmented and flexible regime of European production

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Abstract

In current debates on precarization in Europe, a transnational and more class-based perspective is demanded. While fully supporting this request, this article nevertheless notices that, often, when it comes to the economic logic of current Europeanization, scholars have only taken a one-sided look at financial capital and financialization. What is needed is a deeper conceptual understanding of European labour and production processes and how their transnational organization is interwoven with both the European integration project and rising precarization. In an inter-disciplinary approach, combining critical political economy, economic and social geography, and the sociology of work and industry, this article seeks to tackle the problem and develops three main arguments. The first is that, long before the 2008ff. crisis, a mode of *Europeanization as multi-scalar competitive integration* developed, one that, basically, takes socio-spatial unevenness as a competitive advantage. The second argument is that the backbone of this competitive Europeanization mode is a transnationalized *European regime of fragmented and flexible production*. This regime particularizes labour and labour processes on all social scales, within and beyond nation-states, by putting them in a competitive relation to each other. The third argument is that due to permanent transnational restructuring and technological (digital) modernization, no stable socio-spatial division of labour within and among the European countries arises. Instead, permanently changing forms of labour's social polarization occur, a finding that questions classic ideas

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of social development through economic and technological modernization. Precarization, defined as the detachment of dependent labour working conditions from the means of integrative social participation, hereby describes a specific concentration of a nevertheless wider structural uncertainty that is inherent to both the mode of European integration and the regime of European production.

Keywords

Europeanization, labour process, precarization, production, transnationalization

Precarization, Europeanization, and the need to conceptualize labour and production processes

There is a growing body of literature on the question of how to theorize precarization of work and employment as an inherent part of actual Europeanization. Hereby, the importance of a more class-based perspective is emphasized because this would allow conceptualizing growing precarity, despite nationally different forms and paces, as nation-states transcending social phenomenon. The explicit and, indeed, significant aim is to go beyond comparative-institutionalist explanations towards a view that takes transnational capital-labour logic more into account. Valeria Pulignano (2017: 36ff.), for example, criticizes *methodological nationalism* namely by the Varieties of Capitalism approach and its succeeding reformulations and puts forward the power resource concept as it is the ongoing struggle between capital and labour that explains 'the weakening and deinstitutionalization of organized labour relative to capital' and, hence, rising precarization. Charles Umney et al. (2018) propose a Marxian and Kaleckian inspired notion of 'class discipline' to conceptualize post-2008ff. crisis European labour market policy. Many authors refer to the *new economic governance* that, across Europe, implements austerity measures and structural 'reforms' towards the (further) deregulation of social rights (Busch et al. 2013; Hermann 2017; Marginson & Welz 2014).

Analysing precarization from a transnational Europeanization-perspective is decidedly important. It shifts the focus from the multiple, ever changing specific forms of precarious work and employment (short-term and zero-hours contracts, temporary work, false self-employment etc.) to a more generalized consideration. Precarious work and employment can be grasped as those forms of dependent-labour's working conditions that do not allow someone to achieve the historically 'normal' level of social and political participation in social life and society (Castel 1995; Dörre 2015). Precarization, hence, describes the constitution of dependent labour in a way that detaches it from the material and immaterial means of societally integrative social reproduction. This can include very low wages, irregular employment, highly flexibilized time schedules, the *de facto* absence of workers' representation and also particularly difficult and exhausting working conditions (Paugam 2002). However, from a class-based perspective, precarization is explicitly no longer regarded as a particular problem of some affected social groups (younger people, women, the less qualified, etc.) but it is analysed as a structural category, that is, as part of a general reconstitution of European capital-labour-relations.

However, there are also certain limitations in the current debate. To put it briefly, a conceptual consideration of labour and production processes in relation to precarization and Europeanization is missing. In fact, when it comes to Europe and Europeanization, the debates refer basically to two fundamental strands of explanation. One is the highly reputable perspective on precarization as in essence being the result of a new, 'neoliberal' European ruling regime (Bourdieu 1998). By politics of (enforced) workfare, activation and recommodification social vulnerability rises, not only for those directly affected but also for the still better situated working people (Peck & Theodore 2000). The second basic strand of explanations puts the emphasis on finance capital and financialization (Becker et al. 2015; Lapavistas 2009). The ahistoric and short-termed orientation of finance capital, unleashed by a European monetary policy and manifested not least in speculation against nation-states, are debated as the main polit-economic forces of rising flexibilization, deregulation and precarization of work and employment (Bieler & Morton 2001; Nousios et al. 2012).¹

Again, there is no doubt about the importance of European neoliberal policies or financialization as such. What weighs is, as I said, the lack of theoretical considerations of labour and production processes. Remarkable enough, while actual debates push for more class-based and transnational perspectives, the European configuration of work and production is largely left out of the analysis. 'Economy' and the economic logic of European integration seem to be covered by 'finance' – as if work and production along with value-capturing logic would, otherwise, be no problem today.² There is, in other words, the conceptual need to shed light on Europeanization and precarization in relation to the European configuration of work and production, more precisely: its actual dominant mode, the current *socio-economic form* in which European labour and production processes occur (Appay 1997; Frade & Darmon 2005). In fact, Bob Jessop (2012: 94) reminds us, quoting Marx, that there is no such thing as capitalist production in general. Capitalist logic exists only in socially, temporally and spatially different formations or 'social forms' as early works of Regulation Theory put it (Aglietta 1976). At the moment, there is almost no debate on the question of whether we see a transnational, European social form of capitalist production and what this may have to do with both the mode of European integration and the degradation of working conditions as a structural feature in it.

A conceptual debate on the social form of contemporary European production and its integration into debates on Europeanization and precarization is, however, crucial for at least three reasons. The *first* is that only with regard to labour and production processes can we fully grasp the current mode of Europeanization as one that is *structurally* based on labour's socio-spatial unevenness, both among and within nation-states. As I will argue in the article, Europeanization today can be indicated as *economic integration through multi-scalar socio-spatial fragmentation*. This basic mode of European integration only comes into view with a deeper conceptual look at the *qualitative* transformation of production, which is its *transnationalization* in governance, calculation and competitive control on the one hand and the multiple and highly flexible socio-spatial *fragmentation* of labour and labour processes across Europe on the other hand. Both, the polit-economic mode of European integration and the current social form of European production foster socio-political unevenness as a competitive advantage for economic integration

through investment in a country, region, location or single workplace. Contemporary Europeanization is, therefore, based on multi-scalar competitive fragmentation, it is *multi-scalar competitive integration*.

This leads to the *second* reason why a theoretical reflection on the contemporary social form of European work and production is important. Only in a theoretical perspective that acknowledges the nation-state transcending character of contemporary production can we push forward the need to overcome *methodological nationalism* in its most regressive dimension: the conceptual nationalization of labour. By neither falling into an ahistoric overgeneralization taking the working class as in itself and always international nor following the conventional but misleading theoretical approach that capital is global but labour is national in its character (see for this: Williams et al. 2013), we can ask for an actual social constitution of labour *that includes the national scale but, at the same time, cuts through and transcends it*. Only with regard to the contemporary social form of European production it is possible to analyse, in other words, that labour's multiple socio-spatial fragmentation is not the falling into amorphous, disconnected pieces but the constitution of highly dynamic *competitive relations*³ among the fragmented workforces, both, nearby on the same shopfloor as well as in relation to other regions or countries. Moreover, these multi-scalar competitive relations are not only 'objectively' created but are also 'subjectively' reproduced by workers and trade unions, on all scales (Hürtgen 2014). Rising precarization is, hence, inherently part of competitive European integration as wage cuts, flexibilization and outsourcing are the typical features in a *concession bargaining* orientation that aims to defend the national, regional, or local production, and the particular enterprise, production site or department against (potential) competitors, closures or relocation. Only with reference to production, in short, we can theorize and problematize a *European space of labour* that is marked by harsh translocal and transnational competition, a multi-scalar competition that already for quite a while has been part of everyday experiences and practices at work without being adequately theorized and criticized in current heterodox debates on Europeanization (for an exception, see Bernaciak 2015).

This leads to the *third* reason why the integration of European production is so important for the reflection on labour's precarization in contemporary Europeanization. As I will discuss, the European configuration of production is dynamic, unstable and cost-squeezing to an extent that puts dualistic divisions not only between 'precarious' and 'non-precarious' workers but also between 'core' and 'periphery' into question, both socially and spatially. I argue that a European regime of fragmented and flexible production has occurred with a mode of existence that is in *permanent translocal and transnational restructuring*. The social and organizational configurations of work and production are permanently re-shaped – and so is the European division of labour. This means that the socially or geographically designed 'core' or 'protected' workforces not only experience wage cuts, flexibilization and intensification of their work due to governance by competitive pressure but they also experience an ever-ongoing structural uncertainty about the very continuation at all of 'their' production. The theorization of European production, insofar as it happens, affirms and sharpens a notion of precarization as a relative and specific part of a generalized social crisis of dependent work, transcending the different fragmented workforce-categories socially and spatially (Doellgast 2012;

Hürtgen 2008). Hence, with a deeper understanding of the European regime of fragmented and flexible production, we can also better understand the common, but nevertheless highly fragmented experiences of working people and trade unions across Europe.

So, the aim of this article is to deepen and to strengthen a class-based, transnational perspective on precarization and Europeanization through a conceptual discussion of actual European labour and production processes in their relation to the current mode of European integration. I argue that there is, today, a mode of *multi-scalar competitive European integration* which for its part is based on and interlinked with a *fragmented and flexible regime of European production*. The latter is permanently and transnationally reconfigured on the basis of the multiple and competitive fragmentation of labour processes. In a way, however, linking precarization with a notion of European production makes pushing for progressive alternatives no easier. Multi-scalar competitive fragmentation, I argue, is a social structure. This means that alternatives are neither (only) to be found in a reformed European currency and monetary policy nor is a simple appealing for solidarity instead of fragmentation adequate – as if this would be purely a question of consciousness and individual choice. Rather, what is at stake is to look for materialized capacities to change, to redefine social relations among (all) European working people – which is to question the contemporary social form of production. Hereby, one important starting point is to attack dominant considerations of competitiveness as a means of development, theoretically and politically (Selwyn 2016, Phelps et al. 2018).

The structure of the article is as follows. In the next section, I develop the notion of contemporary Europeanization as a mode of multi-scalar competitive integration and I discuss its basic logic, that is, economic integration through socio-spatial fragmentation. Hereby, I refer to critical European political economy (Altvater & Mahnkopf 1993; van Apeldoorn et al. 2009) and bring this together with critical human geography and the notion of *glocalization* (Brenner 2004). In the following three sections, I discuss the idea that the backbone of that mode of European integration is a specific social form of the European organization of work and production. Taking concepts from industrial and work sociology (Grimshaw & Rubery 2005) and from global and European production networks research (Gereffi et al. 2005), I describe the basic dynamics of that European production regime (transnationalization, fragmentation and permanent restructuring) and I discuss its mode of governance through *competitive comparing*. I furthermore debate the ongoing (digital) transformation of the labour processes that overlaps with and dynamizes both socio-spatial restructuring and competitive fragmentation along all socio-spatial scales, within and beyond nations, regions, locations and productions sites or workplaces. I show that, as a result, a highly unstable socio-spatial division of labour occurs which profoundly questions classic ideas of social development through the integration of regions and countries into the European market and transnational European production. Instead, precarious conditions of work and employment are inscribed in that social form of European production and the polit-economic mode of European integration.⁴ All this is important, not least, for labour and trade unions, as I will discuss in the ‘Competitive Europeanization and labour’ section, where I propose tackling ruling understandings of ‘competitiveness’. In the last section, I synthesize the arguments.

Competitive Europeanization: economic integration through social fragmentation

During the 1970s, to overcome stagnation of economic integration, the principles and basic socio-economic understandings of European integration were fundamentally changed (Bieling 2001; van Apeldoorn 1998; Ziltener 1999). In place of the Keynesian approach to establish the common market through European *harmonization* of economic standards, integration was principally redefined as the participation in the European market *under conditions of henceforth voluntarily retained socio-political differences among member states*. The clear and outspoken aim of this shift was the intensification of internal European competition through the institutionalization of the principle of *mutual acknowledgement* of nationally different regularities and principles of production.⁵ Countries and regions with socio-economically distinct conditions would compete in a common market of commodities, services and capital – and this would, following neoclassical assumptions, stimulate investment, trade and growth (Cecchini 1988). In denouncing the former approach to developing socio-economic standards on a European scale as bureaucratic and inflexible, the slogan since that time has been to dynamize integration through *regime competition*.

Putting it differently, the new Europeanization project reflects and fosters national transformations from Keynesian Welfare States into *competition states* (Cerny 1997; Hirsch 1987) or *Schumpeterian Workfare States* (Jessop 1993).⁶ In particular, ‘welfare’ is transformed into ‘workfare’, as the institutional structure of the EMU combines the supranational conduction of a monetary and market-liberalization policy with ‘national state responsibility for competitive labor markets’ (Bonefeld 2012: 52; see also Altvater & Mahnkopf 1997). States’ social and labour market policies become the means to ‘adjust’ competitive monetary and speculative pressures and turn these into supply factors to attract (transnational) capital in competition with other European nation-states. During and after the European crisis of 2008ff., this policy approach was notably striking when a new regime of direct authoritarian control of member states evolved, namely the ‘Troika’, forcing mainly (but not exclusively) so called ‘crisis-countries’ to implement massive deregulation and degradation of their collective-bargaining rights and their social systems in a larger sense (Erne 2015; Schulten & Müller 2013). However, this direct authoritarian turn was not the beginning but an aggravation of a European Integration policy that particularizes social rights.⁷

What is theoretically important to add to these debates with regard to precarization is the dimension of scale, more precisely of multi-scalarity. In fact, European competition states are *glocalizing* competition states, as Neil Brenner (2004) put it: the sub-national competitive localism and – hence – rising intra-national uneven development are inscribed in the renunciation of the former national hierarchic-bureaucratic redistributive state projects (see also Heeg 2008; Swyngedouw 2004).⁸ We see this logic in the regional and local perforation of collective-bargaining and generally in the supply-oriented, competitive regionalism policy that manifests place-specific locational features against each other both within and beyond nation-states (Raines 2003).⁹ Contemporary Europeanization is, hence, *multi-scalar competitive Europeanization* and labour is at the heart of that competitive non-standardization. On all scales, from the

local to the European (and beyond) socio-spatial unevenness is redefined such that it serves 'as a basis for economic growth' (Brenner 2004: 475). The European regime of fragmented and flexible production that I will analyse in the next three sections could only develop on the basis of that *polit*-economic mode of multi-scalar competitive Europeanization. As I will discuss, precarization of work and employment is inscribed in that social form of European production as labour's fragmentation is led by a transnationalized *cost-capability ratio* (Yeung & Coe 2015).

Transnationalization, fragmentation and digitalized competitive comparing: governing contemporary European production

As Bastiaan van Apeldoorn (2002) has shown, this redefinition towards *competitive European integration* has been programmatically pushed by transnational corporations and their lobby-groups (for this see also Wigger 2008: 185ff.). Their interest was and is to 'explore the [European] differences in terms of wages, fiscal, social and environmental standards [as] a significant incentive for investment' and a key driver of ongoing transnational competitive restructuring (Bohle 2006, 73). However, for the full understanding of the deeply flexibilized and glocally fragmented social form of contemporary European production a deeper look at its dominant organizational mode is necessary.

With the end of the post-war Fordist growth period, the dominant mode of organization of work and production experienced a paradigmatic change in Europe and beyond. Faced with intensifying global competition, the ideal of capital's relative long-term oriented *fixation* on machinery and labour forces and its rigidity in terms of vertical integration of production was turned upside down. The dominant mode now is to achieve most *flexibility* through production's internal and external *segmentation*¹⁰ and *permanent re-configuration of production* (Harvey 1989a; Scott 1988; Womack et al. 1990). *Internal* segments belong to the firm, for example operating relatively budget-autonomous production sites (run as 'cost-centres'), customer specific production-lines, working groups, service centres or even individual workforce units. *External* segmentation is the outsourcing-process, that is, the transfer of service and production functions onto flexible and pyramidal orchestrated suppliers.¹¹ Internal and external segmentation overlaps dynamically with permanent spatial reconfiguration (in management's language 'optimization'), transcending localities, regions and nation-states. Liberalization of the global and European ('Common') market, low transportation costs and new IT-technologies enabled and accelerated this process. As we will see in the next section, this industrial spatial restructuring started with the relocation of Taylorist mass-production, but it now covers the entire value chain including sophisticated services and corporate functions which are outsourced and/or relocated (Sassen 2005). As a result, complex European and worldwide production networks occur (Gereffi et al. 2005), structured as flexible, multiple segmented ('decentralized') transnational networks to deal with increasingly short-term and eruptive market-developments.

It would be misleading, however, to focus on this firm's decentralization as flat network-building – as was the case for a long time. Rather, the counterpart of decentralization is the *centralization* of the firm's network control and governance (Altmann & Deiß 1998; Contractor et al. 2010; Gereffi 1996; Gereffi et al. 2005; Lüthje et al. 2013).

Digital coordination capacities, from the beginning, have been crucial for the centralized governance of these dispersed and highly dynamic networks as they allow for control and governance across organizations and space (Altmann 1992). Even more important for the current argument: centralized (and digitalized) control permits the flexible *competitive comparing* of both internal and external segments through comprehensive digital reporting, for example in numeric measures of costs, efficiency and quality. This multi-dimensional competitive comparing is crucial with regard to labour, as it intensifies locational uncertainty and social competition (Lüthje et al. 2013; for the creation of a 'calculative European space' see Verschraegen 2015). As with countries, regions and localities, the different production sites, cost-centres or departments also compete for investment. Also working groups compete against each other, for instance in flexibility or absenteeism-rates and with the threat, for example, of losing 'variable' parts of wages (a pressure often exercised against low-wage workers for example in Eastern Europe), or to run out of fixed contracts. In particular in the automotive industry, but also in the sphere of digitalized platform-work, benchmarking is common, a process whereby firms and organizational divisions compete for given targets or apply for pre-defined tasks and orders, comparing themselves with 'the best' companies and in the end gaining the award (Greer & Hauptmeier 2015).

In short, a highly flexible regime of production occurred in Europe, with a transnational mode of segmentation on the one hand and the competitive linking of the divided labour processes on the other hand (Hammer & Riisgaard 2015: 90). The multiple and temporarily dynamic (short-term) splitting of production permanently 'resets the basis on which different labour processes are linked and compete with each other', and this can be observed in relation to geographically remote locations as well as to the 'workforce within the firm whereby workers essentially perform equivalent tasks, yet are divided by a range of different employment statuses' (Hammer & Riisgaard 2015; Marchington et al. 2005).

Competitive comparing, on the one hand, increases the pressure on more or less all workers but on the other hand the flexible division into ever new forms and configurations of socially differently constituted workforce-categories is part of the multi-scalar fragmentation logic. Precarization, as I will discuss in the next section, is inherent to that process, both, in remote 'low-wage' European countries as well as nearby, in the same region or location.

The socio-spatial division of labour, precarization and 'low-end' work in Europe

The logic of precarization can be seen through a deeper look at the European division of labour that develops with the fragmented and flexible regime of European production.

In the first step of the analysis this can be seen when we look at the European socio-spatial configuration of labour which occurred at the beginning of the transnationalization process during the 1970s. This is the *intra-sectoral division of labour* in the so called 'high' and 'low' end of production. It comprises the *relocation of simple mass-production* ('low end'), into those other locations, regions, countries or continents which are marked by considerably lower social standards and often weak or repressed union activity (Fröbel

et al. 1977). Hence, competition on social costs is at its heart; textile and electronic industries and Taylorist work on assembly lines stand paradigmatically for this kind of socio-spatial restructuring. Socially, 'low-end' work is apostrophized as requiring fewer qualifications and being less demanding in terms of recognition or motivation, and it is characterized by (very) low wages and bad working conditions; the workforce is often highly feminized and the regime of work repressive. Within nation-states, the focus is typically on the *inner peripheries*, that is, in sparsely industrialized or particularly vulnerable regions with high unemployment (Massey 1984). Precariousness, here, has been discussed first as a phenomenon of 'segmented labour markets' with considerably lower standards in the 'low-end' segment (Peck 1996; Rubery 1978; Sengenberger 1978: 46ff.). With regard to other *countries*, simple mass-production was and is typically transferred to countries from the Global South and the European (semi-)periphery, such as Spain, Portugal or Tunisia but also – even before the breakdown of the 'real socialist' model – central Eastern European countries. Many of these (semi-) peripheral countries have been under military dictatorship or repressive regimes, so that labour's precariousness and vulnerability was (and is) also in its very political dimension implicated in the formation of transnational production networks (Frank 1983).

The intra-sectoral division of labour directly, hence, enhances precarization in Europe (and beyond), and it does so on different spatial scales. In the inner peripheries of the central European countries, the transferred work is widely regarded as additional income, in particular for women, and in the investment abroad in European (semi-)peripheries work conditions – contrary to a widespread belief – often fall below already low regional social standards, in particular in terms of wages (Schipper 2016; Wichterich 2000).¹² So, 'low-end' relocation relies directly on the logic of disconnecting working conditions from the means of social and political integration (Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), 2017). This disconnection of dependent labour from the means of societally integrative social reproduction faces working populations across Europe, in the 'low-wage' countries and also in the inner peripheries. Moreover, in both, there is the permanent threat of further relocation as firms' costs- and flexibility-competition and their 'need' to keep wages low is an ongoing process (see examples in Lüthje et al. 2013: 200ff.). 'High end' production and work, by contrast, which is by definition more sophisticated, skilled and advanced (in particular professional and intellectual work such as engineering or development), is associated with good working conditions and wages and a strong, often unionized participation in social life. It was mainly situated in what was and is regarded as the (national and regional) European cores. In the scientific and trade union debate, it was stated for a long time that these working conditions are not in danger, as 'high end' work is protected from cost-competition (Hürtgen 2015: 96ff.).

Permanent restructuring and the troubling question of social development

What is important now with regard to precarization is that the previously described socio-spatial 'high- and low'-end division between centre and periphery is *highly dynamic and unstable*. To include this instability in theoretical considerations is very important because it questions basic scientific suppositions and political postulations.

The long-lasting debate was, and still often is, that working populations in the internal and external (semi-)peripheries would achieve better conditions with what is called the *upgrading* of production, that is, its technological and organizational modernization. In fact, the dominant discourse treated/treats transnationalization of production and investment as a development-project. *Economic upgrading was/is associated with social upgrading*, that is, the improvement of working conditions (see for example, Humphrey & Schmitz 2002, in explicit critical perspective: Bair & Werner 2015). So, technological and organizational modernization seemed to be the road to take towards 'Western' or 'core' social conditions of labour – and it is still widely propagated in this manner today, to legitimize supply-oriented politics towards foreign investment.

The systematic instability of the European socio-spatial division of labour, however, shows a different, much more complicated and problematic picture. First, the ongoing technological (mainly digital) modernization (which for its part is inherently linked to socio-spatial restructuring) permanently changes the division of 'high' and 'low' end; second, this does *not* lead to general social improvements, but to permanently new forms of organizational segmentation and social polarization, including massive *social downgrading* for many (Bair & Werner 2015).

When we look first at the so called developed Western production, formerly 'high-end' white-collar domains, such as sales and marketing, administration or software development are largely transformed into strict Taylorized (and often poorly paid) digital work, *becoming low end*, so to speak. Standardized work, again, is easier to bundle and to separate out 'into tradable, quantifiable entities . . . that can be done elsewhere', as described, or in another organizational unit of the former firm, or outsourced to another firm, nearby or remotely in another region or country (Howcroft & Richardson 2012: 112; Huws 2014). However, in the classic former 'low-end' European areas, we see a similar logic. This is that, on the one hand, *technological and organizational modernization* ('upgrading') of the formerly (low-end) 'extended workbenches' is widespread, particularly by the installation of up to date technologies and advanced (digital) production and coordination capacities. *Social upgrading*, on the other hand, that is, the considerable improvement of working conditions, is however *not* the outcome of that modernization process. Instead we find – comparable to the processes in the centre – the (further) organizational and social splitting and dynamic reconfiguration of work. This may include improvements for some, but the key element of the process is not social upgrading but the permanent 'reworking of firm-level labour hierarchies' (Barrientos et al. 2011; Coe & Hess 2013; Plank et al. 2012; Werner 2016: 462). While some may benefit from better working conditions, typically certain white-collar workers, specialists or 'core-workers', there is the enlargement and deepening of poor and precarious working conditions for many, in particular blue-collar workers or, as described, digitally Taylorized services and administrations.

In short, there is no stable socio-spatial division of labour in Europe. Instead, we face a transnational regime of flexible production in Europe that is based on socio-spatial fragmentation on the one hand, and the permanent flexible reconfiguration of the segments to 'optimize' the whole production process on the other hand. Hereby, more and more similar and technologically advanced working tasks are spread geographically and compete over labour's flexibility and prices, hence, directly on social standards (Lipietz

1997).¹³ This inherently includes precarization, that is, uncountable forms of work and employment that transfer the firm's market risks and *cost-capability competition* onto the workforce in a way that cuts dependent labour's working conditions from the means of societally integrative social reproduction.

This cutting ranges from 'normal' contracts with very low wages as described earlier (new member states such as Romania and Bulgaria, 'crisis-countries' such as Greece or associated countries from the more remote periphery such as Serbia are particularly hit) through different forms of short-term contracts, agency work, false self-employment and lower standards for young people or the unemployed or the famous zero-hour contracts. All these and many other forms of precarious work and employment exist both abroad in other countries as well as nearby, in the same region or location of production (Bosch 2015; Pulignano & Arrosmith 2013). Typically, even within one 'cost centre' or production site there exist many different forms of precarious workforce-categories, to enhance not only flexibility but also competition among them. Moreover, faced with the ongoing segmentation and permanent competitive comparisons described earlier, better situated workforces also experience uncertainty and vulnerability concerning the future of production and labour processes. In this sense, precarization is to be understood as a specific sharpening of a generalized, structural uncertainty that develops not only on the basis of political deregulation but also, and not less important, on the basis of a fragmented, highly unstable and flexibilized European regime of production.

Competitive Europeanization and labour

With an eye on the different lines of argument and their ensemble – a polit-economic competitive Europeanization, a permanently restructured transnationalization of production and rising fragmentation and precarization in that process – it is without doubt that, for labour, it is extremely difficult to get out of the multiple and destructive logic of economic and social competition. Situated in a structural dependency on capital and investment, labour experiences enormous political and economic pressure and often also direct union-busting. However, it is also important to note that trade unions are not always pure victims of this process but are often actively involved in it. European transformation towards competitive integration was, at least in the beginning, in the 1970s and 1980s, a *hegemonic* project, with most European trade unions and labour parties on board (Bieling & Schulten 2001; van Apeldoorn 2002). The basic idea of retaining nationally different social systems and labour relations was interpreted as being for their *protection*. Later, at a national level, trade unions across Europe actively participated in national competitive coalitions, counteracting efforts for more cooperation on a European scale, for example in terms of European wage-coordination (Bieling & Schulten 2001; Fajertag & Pochet 2000; van Apeldoorn 2002). An expression of this is the continuing orientation towards 'strong' export by German trade unions. Germany's export position is itself to a large extent created by a remarkably precarious low-wage sector, which in the end is a cost-advantage in relation to other European countries (Lehndorff 2015 [2014]). German trade unions and in particular IG Metall, however, contest low wages only half-heartedly as they do not want to give up the strong German export position. Competitive coalitions, however, are also common practice on the regional, local and urban scale. As on the

national scale, local and regional coalition-building includes trade unions and other labour market actors to position local labour supply and other 'assets' as an attractive competitive device. Deregulation, hereby, typically goes along with programmes to strengthen labour's employability through qualification offensives and the like (Harvey 1989b; Hudson & Sadler 2004; Phelps & Raines 2003).

On the company scale, political destandardization and deregulation of social and labour rights pushes particularization and firm-centrism. This 'tying of the interests of workers to the fortunes of their employers, embodying working class power in the factory' (Burawoy 1983: 602f.) is often actively provoked by socio-spatial segmentation, competitive comparing, benchmarking and active 'whipsawing' by management as described earlier. Bound to a firm's relative economic and spatial competitive position, concession bargaining is the common contemporary framework of the local facility's trade union policy. Further flexibilization, wage cuts, local fragmentation, and precarization are their main features (Las Heras 2018) – the latter for example enforced by outsourcing, different and also precarious contracts for some of the staff.¹⁴ In other words, competitive particularization and localization of trade union policy is constitutive for the European mode of competitive integration and its regime of transnational flexible production; again, this happens on all scales and with trade unions on the one hand as victims and on the other hand as actively involved participants in the process.

To discuss this, I do not want to revisit here the huge and important debate on the necessity of a new kind of unionism, often called *social movement unionism* (Waterman 2014). I rather want to make one point which in my understanding is crucial to strengthen this different unionism perspective. This is the need to offensively question socio-economic competition. I deliberately say *questioning* and not overcoming because competition is, more than ever, a structural feature which cannot be broken by labour's pure willingness or attitude. However, in the European trade union movement, with its widespread practice of concentrating on 'core'-workforces, there is the fateful tradition of considering competitiveness as a means of development – and conversely to project and splinter its destructive dimensions as a question of underdevelopment: less favourably situated groups such as women, precarious workforces or those in low-wage conditions abroad, are often stigmatized as being less capable than those with higher wages and better conditions (see section 'Competitive Europeanization and labour'). Moreover, racism and xenophobic stereotypes are also inscribed in the overall socio-economic logic of winning and losing, echoing the ruling ideological *ethnicization and xenophobic culturalization of the social* (Harvey 2005: 84ff.; Hall 1985). This is, by far, not only the business of the extreme right, as became obvious during the 2008ff. crisis with discourses on 'lazy Greeks', 'brave Germans', 'successful Eastern Europeans' and so on (Hadjimichalis 2018). With regard to precarious workforces, we find similar stereotypes in companies (Hürtgen 2014, 2019b). Social fragmentation and destruction are externalized through racist and xenophobic culturalization, again: on all scales and across Europe, and also trade unions often enough on their part sustain fundamental stereotypes.

In this situation, the widespread slogan that trade unions should become 'more European' and that they should put more emphasis on inter-nationalization is misleading. Of course, it would be great to coordinate at the European level (strike) activities and resistance against further deregulation or to support progressive politics in so called

‘crisis-countries’ (as paradigmatically in Greece some time ago). However, what is at stake is not to take the step from the national to the European – trade unions *are* European, and have been for quite a while, in a competitive, particularized manner. What is needed, instead, is to *change* these current social relations and to develop a position of ‘radical contemporaneity’ that pushes, on all scales, for a different ‘politics of interrelations’ (Massey 2005: 5ff.). The basis for that is to break with all ideological forms that legitimize competition and hence social fragmentation and precarization. Competition has to be framed as a structural feature in capital’s interests which is dangerous and destructive for labour as a whole. ‘Winning’ in the European and global social competition is profoundly relative, that is, limited in time and space.

Conclusion – competitive Europeanization, fragmented European labour and the precarization of work and employment

I have argued in this article that precarization is systematically inherent to a transnational European regime of flexible, highly fragmented and unstable production. Segmentation and fragmentation allow continual restructuring and – in the Management’s view – ‘optimization’ of the production process with regard to the (lead) firm’s position in the European and global market. Labour finds itself socio-spatially highly fragmented on the one hand, but put into a competitive relationship on the other hand. Cost-competition and the systematic use of low wages and highly precarious employment-conditions are not, as it was widely stated, limited to some confined (‘low-end’) parts of production transferred to the external and internal European periphery. On the contrary, the detachment of dependent labour’s working conditions from societally integrative means of social reproduction is a central feature of the current social form of European production, reflecting strong cost-capability competition as the driving dimension of contemporary transnationalization of production. As a result, the socio-spatial European division of labour is in constant reconfiguration, precarious working conditions are installed for more and more work-functions and the distinction between what is the socio-spatial centre and what is the socio-spatial periphery is highly dynamic. This fundamentally questions classical understandings of (technological) competitiveness as a means for social development. Instead of social upgrading and alignment with Western cores through technological evolution, the latter turns out to be a central dimension of further re-fragmentation and reorganization, including direct social downgrading, in both core-locations as well as peripherals and on all socio-spatial scales. As a result, locations of production across Europe nowadays are characterized by a remarkable, sometimes overwhelming amount of multiple and growing forms of highly vulnerable conditions of work and employment, barely allowing people to participate in social and political life.

This European regime of fragmented and flexible production is at the heart of a wider European political economy and its mode of *multi-scalar competitive integration*.¹⁵ This integration-mode is, indeed, ‘divisive integration’, as Steffen Lehndorff (2015) puts it; more precisely it echoes, institutionalizes and generalizes hegemonically the particular managerial perspective to take social unevenness as a competitive advantage for the (transnational) configuration of production. Hereby, *integration* is *de facto* redefined as

integration in (any) economic activity, conceptually and institutionally uncoupled from socially integrative standards – in spite of the permanent rhetoric of a Social Europe. On the contrary, the *non-standardization* of national socio-political norms, institutions and policies, and their *unevenness*, is regarded as a precondition for economic integration.

Multi-scalar competitive Europeanization not only divides nation-states but competitive fragmentation cuts through nation-states and transcends them. On all socio-spatial scales particularized working conditions are competitively related to others; competitive Europeanization, hence, fragments regions, locations, production sites and shop floors. A daily experienced European space of labour has developed that is marked by harsh trans-local and transnational competitive relations. Precarization is, therefore, a transnational phenomenon; it is the tip of the iceberg within a comprehensive structural uncertainty in a dominant social form of European production that aggravates socio-spatial fragmentation across and within European countries.

The national/European glocalizing competition states are an active part of that sort of Europeanization, enhancing competitive fragmentation through social destandardization and the socio-political weakening of labour. In effect, a transnational competitive firm's segmentation and restructuring is paralleled with the process of socio-spatial rescaling by the European glocalizing competition states and the European institutions.¹⁶ Both, capital and the European state apparatus instal 'competitive relations between workers and between places' (Peck 1996: 238f.). And both, capital and European state apparatus, take socio-political unevenness as an enhancement for economic (investment) integration. They share, in short, the very logic of economic integration through social fragmentation, that is, multi-scalar *fragmenting development* (Scholz 2005).

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Notes

1. Umney et al. (2018: 339) summarize that 'financialisation implies class discipline' and Pulignano (2017: 43) states that the 'competition of financial market capitalism is transferred from the economic (private) world to social (public) fields', so that 'employment and labor market structures and policy correspond to the hegemonic spirit of contemporary financial market capitalism'.
2. For reasons of space, it cannot be discussed here that an underlying problem in many analyses is that 'productive' and 'financial' capital are treated as strictly separated with the latter pressuring on the former. What is often left out is that 'productive' capital in the form of big corporations also actively participated in the creation of strong financial markets and institutions (Chesnais 2016).
3. For competitive relations see Brenner 2004; Hartmann 2015: 126ff.
4. This, of course, does not mean that precarization or even disobedience and protests against it are 'the same' across Europe (see for this Doellgast Lillie & Pulignano 2018; Kalleberg & Vallas 2018; Rubery et al. 2018). On the contrary, the dynamic creation of ever new

- configurations of socio-spatial unevenness between social groups, regions and countries is at the heart of contemporary political and economic Europeanization. This, however, should not prevent us using a general notion of the dynamics that lay behind the process (Harvey 1982; Smith 1984).
5. Fritz Scharpf (2009) discusses in detail how this process was institutionalized through the transformation of law-making bodies and a series of judgements in the European court in the 1970s and 1980s.
 6. It is important to note that nation-states, mainly but not exclusively from the 'core', actively promoted this process. In the early 1980s, Ireland and the United Kingdom, in particular, traced this model of supply-oriented politics when they designed-in a set of incentives in terms of taxes and deregulated labour to attract investments (Phelps 2008). Today it is paradigmatically Germany that accelerates the competitive logic (see below).
 7. It is only little known that European institutions, together with transnational companies and the IMF exercised, well before the so-called 'Greek-crisis', open pressure on some of the European countries, in this case from Central and Eastern Europe. In Estonia the European Commission rejected the country's new labour law, enacted in 2003, as being incompatible with basic EU standards. The commission criticized low labour flexibility, substantial restrictions on overtime work, and too much participation from trade unions. The same was the case in Romania, where the primary source of pressure was the IMF, which pushed for a 'return to Europe' and 'adjustment to EU guidelines' as part of a major financial restructuring package in the wake of the country's economic collapse in the late 1990s. Similar developments are reported in Slovakia. Each time the associations of foreign employers exerted massive pressure behind the scenes. In Romania, the new national labour law, approved in 2003, was dubbed 'incompatible with a free market economy' and repealed, as foreign investors and the IMF complained about exaggerated limitations on working hours and too much trade union influence (Ciutacu 2003; Hürtgen 2019a; Preda 2004: 9f.).
 8. Together with the sociology of migration (Wimmer & Glick-Schiller 2002), economic and social geography belong to the early critics of the 'methodological nationalism', that is, the containerization and 'ontological fixation' on the nation-state (Schmid 2003: 233). Not only institutionalism such as VoC (Jessop 2012) but also regulation theory is in the focus: 'Regulation theory tends to reduce intra-national variability to contingent variability around dominant national models. In the broad sweep of Regulationists analysis, socioeconomic dynamics and forms of regulation associated with particular industries or regions tend to be confined' (Peck 1996: 99).
 9. The investment of a Toyota engine factory in a Polish Special Economic Zone (near Wałbrzych, in the South-West) was the final decision against other Polish zones, but also against the Czech Republic who took part in the investment competition. The incentives finally made in the agreement with Toyota have been kept secret, but it is clear that they are about administrative support, taxes, infrastructure, the labour market and wage subsidies (interview-data 2018 by the author).
 10. 'The essence of flexible competition is flexible and rapid response to changes in the market, whether these result from the behavior of competitors or from demand shifts' (Schoenberger 1988: 254).
 11. Hereby, firms attempt to increase competitiveness through focusing on so-called core competences, be these specialized tasks or even pure research and development, design, branding and distribution (so-called 'fab-less'-firms; see Ernst & Lühje 2003).
 12. Foreign investors in (semi-)peripheral European countries often push low wages, until they are barely enough to live on, and this leads to 'further disorganized decentralization' of social standards (Meardi 2012: 62–84).

13. 'Increasingly, the same product can, for example, be produced by formal and informal employees as well as casual and day labourers working side by side in an exporter's production facilities, as outwork/homework, or by independent informal "entrepreneurs", who often are own-account workers who own neither their means of production, nor the production inputs' (Hammer & Riisgaard 2015: 84)
14. 'Discipline is secured [. . .] through the "whip" of the market, in the form of the potential loss of contracts that connect networked organizations, and often the provision of (temporary) workers within them' (Marchington et al. 2005: 12).
15. The regime of production is not the only component of contemporary competitive European integration. Others, overlapping of course all together, are for example the regimes of finance and currency, of migration, education and infrastructure policy and so on.
16. '[F]lexibility in production is paralleled by that for flexibility in the labor market' (Peck 1996: 122).

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