

The Burden of the Migrant Crisis and Climate Change:

Entrenching Transnational Economic Policy in the European Union

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Abstract

The European Union (EU) has bolstered its global influence by implementing a single market with coordinated economic and fiscal policies and a cohesive, impactful free trade approach. The EU machinery of integration locks member states into specific economic policies that, while harbouring immense profit-generating potential, can present challenging policy dilemmas. While the EU has succeeded in lowering emissions within its borders, legislation has done little to fundamentally alter how businesses interact with the environment, elucidating the challenges associated with addressing climate change on a regional rather than global scale. This paper will argue that the EU's inability to reconcile its economic interests with sustainable development has exacerbated environmental degradation in the Global South and amplified the migrant crisis.

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) has bolstered its global influence by implementing a single market with coordinated economic and fiscal policies and a cohesive, impactful free trade approach. While the Union trends towards deregulation, coordinated economic policies adhere to the framework of ordoliberalism—a form of capitalism that advocates for a robust interventionist state.¹ By utilizing an ordoliberal approach to economics, the EU machinery of integration renders itself impregnable to state-level democratic processes to ensure its vision of free trade persists unchallenged. Though capitalism is not necessarily the source of contemporary EU policy challenges, the entrenchment of free trade policy is intimately linked to the EU's environmental and social impacts. This paper argues that the EU's inability to reconcile its economic interests with sustainable development has exacerbated environmental degradation in the Global South and amplified the migrant crisis.

Environmental Degradation

This section contends that the EU's free trade market strategy, reinforced through ordoliberalism, fosters conditions that promote environmental degradation. Despite EU-implemented policies such as the Emission Trading System (EU ETS) aimed at addressing calls for sustainable development and combating environmental degradation, the EU struggles to achieve its climate objectives within its current economic framework. To better understand EU climate policy dilemmas, this section will comprehensively analyze the competing interests of environmental protection and profit maximization by considering a fundamental critique of capitalist systems.

While capitalism confers immense productive capacities, heightened levels of unequal distribution create a profit motive that often disregards human and environmental consequences. Consequently, the degradation of the environment in pursuit of maximizing business capital becomes inextricably tied to the capitalist endeavour. Capitalism fosters an environment where the natural world is valued only insofar as it can generate monetary profit. Kevin Danaher argues that a capitalist system sees no inherent value in a standing tree—it becomes valuable only once transformed

¹ POLI 379 (2 February 2023), Brightspace lecture recording, <https://bright.uvic.ca/d2l/le/content/269362/view-Content/2087336/View>

into a marketable product.² Concerning the EU, these principles produce quantifiable effects, including the loss of biodiversity, increased frequency and severity of natural disasters, vital resource loss, and climate change.³ The implications for climate change are immense, ranging from increasingly severe weather and storm occurrences to reductions in biodiversity and grave endangerment of human health.⁴ In response to this reality, the EU has proactively attempted to address climate change. However, instead of confronting aspects of the economic system that have exacerbated these circumstances, the EU has sought to reconcile sustainable development and capitalism through ecological modernization. This strategy aims to integrate economic and environmental objectives within a capitalist framework to mitigate modernity's ecological impact through further development.⁵

The EU's approach to sustainable development aims to marry economic and environmental objectives—two ambitions that, within current policy frameworks, seem extremely difficult to reconcile. Some scholars see the strategy of ecological modernization pursued by the EU merely as symbolic and ineffective at fostering lasting change.⁶ The crux of ecological modernization rests in its underlying contradiction with the EU's free trade strategy—persisting consumption within a world of finite resources.⁷ Indeed, it has proven highly challenging for the EU to reconcile sustainable development with ecological modernization, as outlined in the Brundtland Report.

Published by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987, the Brundtland Report details a path toward sustainable development. A vital tenet of the Brundtland Report is that sustainable development requires curbing excessive consumption in the Global North, as ever-increasing material consumption threatens the natural world. The report argues that “critical global environmental problems [are] primarily the result of the enormous poverty of the South and the non-sustainable

2 Kevin Danaher and Anuradha Mittal, “The Market vs. Nature,” in *10 Reasons to Abolish the IMF and World Bank* (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2006), 2.

3 “State of Europe's environment,” European Environment Agency, <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/topics/at-a-glance/state-of-europes-environment> (accessed 30 March 2023).

4 Daniel Faber and Christina Schlegel, “Give Me Shelter from the Storm: Framing the Climate Refugee Crisis in the Context of Neoliberal Capitalism,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 28, no. 3 (2017): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1356494>.

5 Susan Baker, “Sustainable Development as Symbolic Commitment: Declaratory Politics and the Seductive Appeal of Ecological Modernisation in the European Union,” *Environmental Politics* 16, no. 2 (2007): 298, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0964401070121187>.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*, 299.

patterns of consumption and production in the North.”⁸ While the EU’s sustainable development practices have been remarkably successful at slashing emissions within Europe, outsourcing has hindered global progress. In addition to conducting ecologically hazardous activities and natural resource exploitation in the Global South, EU businesses have induced carbon leakage by shifting production of carbon-intensive industries out of the reach of European carbon restraints through a loophole in one of the EU’s sustainable development approaches—the Emissions Trading System (ETS).⁹

Examining the EU ETS reveals the shortcomings of the EU’s approach to sustainable development. The EU ETS uses a cap-and-trade system to limit greenhouse gas emissions within Europe and creates a carbon market where emissions allowances can be purchased or sold when needed. Introduced in response to the United Nations 1997 Framework Convention on Climate Change Kyoto Protocol, the cap-and-trade system is the EU’s answer to the protocol’s carbon emission targets.¹⁰ Interestingly, the cap-and-trade system has frequently produced the inverse effect, increasing global emissions. More specifically, the EU ETS has inspired some European businesses to outsource carbon-intensive activities to the Global South, leading to carbon leakage.¹¹ The EU ETS’s inability to lower the carbon footprint of European companies has fostered doubts about the EU’s market-based regulatory approach.¹² In this regard, the pitfalls of the EU ETS illustrate the challenges associated with addressing climate change on a regional rather than global level.

EU policies aimed at reducing carbon emissions have yielded contradictory outcomes. While emissions within EU borders have decreased, much of this progress can be attributed to carbon leakage. The practice of outsourcing carbon-intensive production to the Global South underscores the difficulty of aligning the EU’s sustainable development objectives with its underlying free trade approach. Moreover, in a globalized economy lacking uniformity in policies restricting carbon emissions, efforts to ad-

8 “1987: Brundtland Report,” Federal Office for Spatial Development ARE: Media and Publications, <https://www.are.admin.ch/are/en/home/media/publications/sustainable-development/brundtland-report.html#:~:text=The%20Brundtland%20Report%20stated%20that,and%20production%20in%20the%20North>. (accessed 7 March 2024)

9 Yda Schreuder, “Unintended Consequences: Climate Change Policy in a Globalizing World,” *Environment & Society* 3 (2012): 103-110, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43297015>.

10 Ibid., 103.

11 “CLEAR Center: Clarity and Leadership for Environmental Awareness and Research at UC Davis,” <https://clear.ucdavis.edu/news/what-carbon-leakage> (accessed 29 March 2023).

12 Yda Schreuder, “Unintended Consequences: Climate Change Policy in a Globalizing World,” *Environment & Society* 3 (2012): 103-104, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43297015>.

dress emissions within Europe may shift emissions from one jurisdiction to another. Furthermore, shifting carbon-intensive production to countries with lenient carbon restraints allows businesses to pollute more than they used to within Europe before the implementation of the EU ETS. One of the most salient geopolitical consequences of a globally disjointed approach to sustainable development is the migrant crisis.

The Migrant Crisis

This section examines how the EU's economic and policy approach exacerbates the migrant crisis. By entrenching a free trade market approach that prioritizes profit and innovation, it's hardly surprising that businesses have discovered and exploited loopholes in policy that allow for the export of carbon-intensive activities abroad. These loopholes in EU policy have indirectly created carbon leakage vis-à-vis increased carbon emissions within the Global South. This increase in emissions has augmented the speed at which Global South environments become inhospitable, intensifying localized climate refugee crises. This section analyzes scholarly research that outlines specific processes involved in creating climate refugees and borrows from Karl Marx's critique of capitalism to elucidate the forces that drive negative sentiment toward migrants.

European businesses exporting carbon-intensive activities to the Global South exacerbate the ongoing migrant crisis by contributing to environmental degradation.¹³ Carbon-intensive activities and practices imposed on Global South communities render them increasingly vulnerable to climate change and extreme weather events. Environmental destabilization hinders community resilience and increases the rate at which inhospitable environments trigger environmental refugees.¹⁴ Environmental refugees are triggered by disaster (unintended catastrophic event), expropriation (willful destruction of the environment), or deterioration (compelled migration due to incremental degradation).¹⁵ The exacerbation of climate crises driven by the capital interests of Global North businesses has led Faber and Schlegel to liken "climate refugees" to "neoliberal ref-

13 Daniel Faber and Christina Schlegel, "Give Me Shelter from the Storm: Framing the Climate Refugee Crisis in the Context of Neoliberal Capitalism," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 28, no. 3 (2017): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1356494>.

14 Daniel Faber and Christina Schlegel, "Give Me Shelter from the Storm: Framing the Climate Refugee Crisis in the Context of Neoliberal Capitalism," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 28, no. 3 (2017): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1356494>.

15 Diane Bates, "Environmental Refugees? Classifying Human Migrations Caused by Environmental Change," *Population and Environment* 23, no. 5 (2002): 470, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27503806>.

ugees.”¹⁶ As outlined by the Norwegian Refugee Council’s International Displacement Monitoring Center, as well as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, environmental hazards and/or catastrophes worsened by climate change created 20 million refugees in 2008 alone—a figure likely surpassing that of war and persecution combined, according to Faber and Schlegel.¹⁷ This trend has continued in 2023, with approximately 56% of the 46.9 million new internal displacements triggered by environmental disasters.¹⁸

While EU policies have successfully reduced emissions within Europe, flawed legislation does little to fundamentally change how businesses interact with the environment. Capitalist societies have generated climate refugees through four principal processes. First, capitalism intensifies the frequency and severity of climate-related disasters, which is evident in the increase in carbon emissions due to carbon leakage.¹⁹ Second, it renders Global South communities less resilient to climate catastrophes due to increased social and ecological impoverishment. Third, corporate-led globalization devastates environmental habitats in the Global South, diminishing ecosystem resilience. Fourth and finally, climate change displaces migrants by forcing them into urban areas where they labour for consumer goods exported to the global market.²⁰

In Syria, climate change forced millions into urban areas and acted as a catalyst for violent conflict. The ongoing Syrian refugee crisis began in 2011 following the Syrian government’s violent repression of public demonstrations that rapidly precipitated a civil war.²¹ As of March 2023, 15.3 million Syrians require humanitarian assistance—70% of Syria’s population.²² One of the root causes of the socio-political instability that created the Syrian refugee crisis was human-caused climate change. While

16 Daniel Faber and Christina Schlegel, “Give Me Shelter from the Storm: Framing the Climate Refugee Crisis in the Context of Neoliberal Capitalism,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 28, no. 3 (2017): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1356494>.

17 Daniel Faber and Christina Schlegel, “Give Me Shelter from the Storm: Framing the Climate Refugee Crisis in the Context of Neoliberal Capitalism,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 28, no. 3 (2017): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1356494>.

18 “Environmental Migration,” Migration Data Portal: The bigger picture, https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/environmental_migration_and_statistics (accessed 10 March 2024).

19 Daniel Faber and Christina Schlegel, “Give Me Shelter from the Storm: Framing the Climate Refugee Crisis in the Context of Neoliberal Capitalism,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 28, no. 3 (2017): 4-7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1356494>.

20 Ibid.

21 “Syria Refugee Crisis Explained,” USA for UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/#:~:text=The%20Syrian%20refugee%20crisis%20began,the%20southern%20town%20of%20Daraa> (accessed 10 March 2024).

22 Ibid.

many areas in the Middle East's Levant region experience drought cycles, that which affected Syria in 2006 was unique. Scholars suggest that human-caused climate change immensely exacerbated the intensity of the drought.²³ Beginning in 2006, the severity of the drought drove 2-3 million Syrians into extreme poverty, creating water scarcity, food insecurity, and loss of livelihood. The ensuing waves of migrants moving from rural agricultural land to urban areas created issues in accessing housing, food, and nutrition, leading to widespread instability.²⁴ The Syrian government's seeming unwillingness to develop practical solutions to address social and economic instability led to political volatility that helped precipitate the ensuing civil war and migrant crisis.²⁵ Indeed, climate-related environmental crises are causing many to seek refuge in Europe, where capitalist-permeated culture remains hostile towards immigrants.

While his ideologies are undoubtedly flawed, analyzing Karl Marx's critique of capitalism provides persuasive insights into the motivations for European xenophobia. Marx fundamentally criticized capitalism, arguing that pursuing capital at the expense of human or ecological considerations renders it inherently dehumanizing.²⁶ According to Keith Faulks, this dehumanization creates extreme competition and alienation, thus blinding people to the suffering of others.²⁷ In the twenty-first century, this critique provides compelling insights into the dehumanization of refugees. Marx argues that a capitalist conception of human interaction is transactional and driven by contractual terms, emphasizing materialism, selfishness, and monetary value rather than cooperation, morality, and civic responsibility.²⁸ The implications of Marx's conception of capitalism for immigration in the EU are evident. In societies with widespread disdain for immigrants due to their perceived lack of "value," Marx's hypothesis is increasingly relevant. Xenophobia in capitalist societies manifests as a sort of perversion of one's conception of the "other" in terms of structures of power. This troubling conception of migrants is especially problematic within the EU, as European values purport to safeguard the dignified treatment of migrants, most of whom help fill labour and talent shortages. Although migrants

23 "Syrian Civil War: The Role of Climate Change," Climate Diplomacy: Middle East and North Africa, <https://climate-diplomacy.org/case-studies/syrian-civil-war-role-climate-change> (accessed 11 March 2024).

24 Sowers, Jeannie, John Waterbury and Eckart Woertz, "Did Drought Trigger The Crisis In Syria?" Footnote, September 12, 2013.

25 Ibid.

26 Keith Faulks, "Capitalism," Edited by Georgina Blakeley and Valerie Bryson. *Marx and Other Four-Letter Words*, (2005): 28, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18fsbp5.6>.

27 Ibid.

28 Daniel Faber and Christina Schlegel, "Give Me Shelter from the Storm: Framing the Climate Refugee Crisis in the Context of Neoliberal Capitalism," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 28, no. 3 (2017): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1356494>.

present opportunities to the labour forces of their new European communities, xenophobia driven by the prioritization of capital still plagues many European societies.²⁹

EU policies have allowed European businesses to engage in practices that exacerbate climate catastrophes, undermine the resilience of Global South communities, and worsen migrant crises. A Marxist critique of capitalism highlights its propensity to breed xenophobic societies, a phenomenon increasingly problematic for European societies that benefit economically from migrants filling shortages in labour and talent markets.

Conclusion

The EU's inability to create policies that effectively address climate change by reconciling its economic interests with sustainable development has worsened the migrant crisis by intensifying environmental degradation in the Global South. The EU's integration project amalgamates participating states, unifying them under a single market with coordinated economic and fiscal policies. While this strategy confers a plethora of benefits for member states, it also poses a significant risk—augmenting the risk associated with free trade economics with the help of a larger political body. This has facilitated the increased exploitation of resources and human labour in and from the Global South while simultaneously furthering the growth of xenophobia within Europe. Policies aimed at reducing carbon emissions in the EU have produced carbon leakage, worsened the migrant crisis, and highlighted the challenges associated with addressing climate change on a regional rather than global scale.

While scholars like Susan Baker argue that the EU's symbolic attempts at sustainable development are empty rhetoric, these symbolic developments harbour transformative potential.³⁰ It is essential to note that while the EU's climate policy approach has struggled to mirror emission reductions within Europe on a global scale, symbolic gestures can act as catalysts of change. Moreover, recent policy developments may help realize the EU's climate goals; the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) aims to address carbon leakage by imposing a tariff on carbon-intensive products manufactured outside the EU. Revisiting the challenges associated with

²⁹ Daniel Boffey, "Pervasive and relentless racism on the rise in Europe, survey finds," *The Guardian*, October 25, 2023, Europe section.

³⁰ Susan Baker, "Sustainable Development as Symbolic Commitment: Declaratory Politics and the Seductive Appeal of Ecological Modernisation in the European Union," *Environmental Politics* 16, no. 2 (2007): 313, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0964401070121187>.

carbon leakage after the full implementation of CBAM in 2026 will provide further insights into the efficacy of the EU's policy approach to sustainable development.

While a close examination of the evidence can provide a working description of this complex topic, further research beyond the bounds of this short paper is needed. Additional insights regarding the link between a globalized economy and regional and global carbon constraints would provide a more precise understanding of policy challenges. Lastly, incorporating the efficacy of EU CBAM once data is available will prove invaluable to the analysis of the EU's policy approach.

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