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## Teaching European political economy and governance with the EU in crisis mode

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### Books reviewed

Moschella, Manuela, Quaglia, Lucia, and Spendzharova, Aneta (Eds.) (2023). *European Political Economy: Theoretical Approaches and Policy Issues* (First Edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Verdun, Amy, Hurrelmann, Achim, and Brunet-Jailly, Emmanuel (Eds.) (2023). *European Union Governance and Policy-Making: A Canadian Perspective* (Second Edition). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Bongardt, Annette, and Torres, Francisco (2024). *Lessons on the Political Economy of European Integration* (Second Edition). Lisbon: Universidade Católica Editora.

### ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of a sheer endless stream of crises which have stress-tested not only Europe's institutions but also our understanding of these institutions, three recent textbooks aim to provide students with the conceptual tools to make sense of politics and policy within and across the European Union. By combining elements from each of the three volumes, teachers of European political economy and governance can craft modules and develop syllabi that make room for critical thinking about the ideal of European integration in light of its political-economic realities. Despite their respective strengths, a number of underexplored methodological and substantive issues across the three textbooks suggest that European political economy will need to remain an open and pluralist endeavour if it is to grasp the challenges presented by Europe's overlapping and quasi-permanent emergencies.

### KEYWORDS

crises; European integration; EU governance; political economy; teaching

That the EU is forged through crises is not only a truism but is also as much of a blessing as it is a curse (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2024). The same can be said not only of studying but also of teaching Europe and the European Union: while each new crisis draws renewed interest, raises novel questions as well as revives old ones, and uncovers important political, policy-making, and institution-building dynamics, there is a latent

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risk of scholars and students ‘ambulance-chasing’ from crisis to crisis (Akbik and Diessner 2025) yet perennially remaining behind the curve. As a result, it is not only time to treat ‘crises’ as the norm rather than the exception for the EU, but also to zoom out from each individual crisis episode in order to draw comparisons and tease out broader lessons for the EU as a polity and for its evolving modes of multi-level governance in an age of permanent emergency (Bressanelli and Natali 2023; White 2020; Zeitlin, Nicoli, and Laffan 2019).

This is precisely what three recent textbooks focussed on teaching the governance and political economy of Europe and the European Union set out to achieve (Bongardt and Torres 2024; Moschella, Quaglia and Spendzharova 2023; Verdun, Hurrelmann and Brunet-Jailly 2023). While each book manages to stake out its own contribution in what is an increasingly crowded field of textbooks and volumes on the study of Europe and the EU (see, among others, Coman, Crespy, and Schmidt 2020; Hix and Høyland 2022; Hodson et al. 2022), it is equally possible to identify commonalities in their approaches to the subject matter – and, by implication, to usefully combine elements from each for designing and delivering courses on European politics and policy in the context of the EU’s permacrisis (that is, ‘one challenge seamlessly followed by the next’; Zuleeg, Emmanouilidis, and Borges de Castro 2021) and poly-crisis (that is, challenges which ‘not only arrived at the same time [but] also feed each other’; Juncker, as cited in Bressanelli and Natali 2023, 246). After reflecting on these commonalities and differences – and what they can teach us about European political economy as a (sub-)discipline – this review sketches out how one may draw on them together for the purpose of teaching and debating European political economy and governance with the EU in crisis mode.

Two aspects stand out at first glance across the three books. The first is ambition: each is remarkably comprehensive in scope yet admirably coherent (which alone makes it well worth to have them in one’s personal collection and the collection of one’s university library). The second is collaboration: two of the three are in fact edited volumes which, as it were, speaks volumes to the fact that political economy in general, and perhaps European political economy in particular, is a collaborative and multi-disciplinary effort. This remains true even if one is not always sure what exactly European political economy (or EPE in short) ‘is’ or ‘does’ in contrast to other approaches to studying Europe. The volume that comes closest to tackling and answering that question head-on is Moschella et al.’s (2023) (for earlier attempts, see Jones and Verdun 2005 or Talani 2014). The answer which the editors put forward boils down to EPE lying at the intersection of international political economy (IPE), comparative political economy (CPE), and European studies (Moschella et al. 2023, 6).

Yet, the fact that each of these fields *themselves* lie at the intersection of the wider disciplines of political science, economics, law, history, sociology, and area studies becomes evident upon closer inspection: while Bongardt and Torres’s textbook (2024) places the emphasis on the economics side of the political-economy equation (with topics including European public goods, the costs and benefits of integration, and the optimal sizes of the monetary union and of the EU playing prominent roles), Verdun et al.’s (2023) volume is written primarily from a political science perspective (with particular emphases on policy-making processes, governance arrangements, and democratic tensions inherent in quasi-federal projects like the European and Canadian ones). This beckons the question whether and to what extent the near-universally-agreed ideal of multi-

disciplinarity among scholars of Europe ultimately does require a ‘core’ or ‘anchoring’ discipline around which to structure a textbook in practice – at least in order to be able to teach and explore the themes of European politics and policy together with our students.

On this latter note, a – or perhaps *the* – main impetus for all three books appears to have been the desire to render eminent if admittedly often abstract and rather conceptual political economy debates *accessible* beyond a relatively small circle of researchers, and especially to (advanced) undergraduate students, including through the use of more accessible language and by invoking a wealth of real-world examples and case studies. This shared desire thankfully enables users of the books to draw on all three as a precious resource to design and build a module on the political economy of European integration and governance in permanent crisis mode. The dedication of Moschella et al.’s (2023) volume to establishing the theoretical foundations of European political economy – covering IPE (open economy politics), CPE (growth models), ideational, and critical and feminist political economy approaches – lends itself in particular to setting the conceptual stage during the first three to four weeks of a given term or semester (with the help of chapters by Copelovitch and Walter, Johnston and Regan, Quaglia et al., and Wigger and Horn; see Moschella et al. 2023, chs. 1–4). Notably, the volume neglects ‘grand’ theories of European integration, perhaps because these have been covered in existing textbooks already (and which can instead be gleaned from Verdun’s chapter in Verdun et al. 2023, ch. 6, or from Box 1.3 in Bongardt and Torres 2024, 38).

Once established, the attention of teachers and learners may shift to the historical and institutional evolution of the EU (not covered separately in Moschella et al.’s volume) by relying on chapters from Bongardt and Torres’s (2024, chs. 1–2) and Verdun et al.’s (2023) textbooks, particularly the contributions by Chira-Pascanut on history, Laursen et al. on political institutions, O’Brien and Bodnár on legal integration, and Tömmel on policy-making and multi-level governance (Verdun et al. 2023, chs. 2–5). The final third of the term or semester can then be dedicated to delving into different policy areas and their respective crises (in fact, the updates to the editions by Verdun et al. and Bongardt and Torres seem to have been motivated precisely by the aim to do justice to the overlapping crises of the past years), by selectively mixing and matching chapters from all three textbooks, depending on which areas one might want to specialize in and how many weeks one has at one’s disposal.

For this, a separate volume of essays compiled by Bongardt and Torres (2023) on the political economy of Europe’s future and identity, which the second edition of their textbook interacts closely with, may come in handy as well – especially when designing student assignments – given its focus on relatively short think pieces which are aimed at sparking debate and therefore almost naturally invite seminar discussions and counter-essays.<sup>1</sup> Finally, Verdun et al.’s (2023) volume is accompanied by a dedicated library of online videos – the so-called EU Governance Videos – which were created throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and which now readily lend themselves to blended and flipped-classroom teaching techniques, in which chapter-relevant videos are assigned to students ahead of lectures or seminars in order to free up space for student-led discussions and presentations during class (see van der Zwan and Afonso 2019).

Despite their respective merits, a number of aspects and issues remain underexplored across the three books. For one, methodological discussions and considerations – which would enable readers to not only debate European political and policy-making processes

conceptually but also help them devise their own research strategies to explore these processes more systematically empirically – remain remarkably de-emphasized in all three (see, however, Box 0.2 in Moschella et al. 2023, 19, for a concise overview). As a result, students who seek to not only employ the concepts and vocabulary of European political economy in order to discuss contemporary policy issues, but also to obtain the relevant tools for conducting political economy analyses of Europe and the EU themselves (for example, to complete their undergraduate or postgraduate theses) will need to look elsewhere and turn their attention to dedicated research design and methods volumes instead (for a notable exception, see De Vries et al. 2021). It is worth contemplating why this might be so. Perhaps European studies and political economy curricula provide for methods training elsewhere, or perhaps students and teachers of European political economy are relatively more interested in substantive, policy-relevant issues than methodological ones.

When it comes to additional substantive issues to be considered (say, in subsequent editions of the textbooks), scholars' and students' inclinations will necessarily vary and move with the times. The conspicuous return of interventionist, (geo-)economic statecraft in the EU (touched upon in Bongardt and Torres 2024 across chapters 5–7), including the growing relevance of the defence-industrial complex which European political economists have not been particularly attuned to studying since the end of the Cold War, constitutes one such topical issue. Another relates to the digital transition – or indeed Europe's variegated and arguably failed digital transition compared to other world regions, including the growing importance of Artificial Intelligence – which requires more serious engagement in the future.

While the green transition is naturally covered extensively (see Burns and Carter in Moschella et al. 2023, ch. 12), not least through the lens of the European Green Deal and the growing backlash against it (see Knodt et al. in Verdun et al. 2023, ch. 17; Bongardt and Torres 2024, ch. 7), one is left wondering whether the accelerating urgency of the climate crisis would not merit a much deeper reflection and a more fundamental rethink of European political economy as a (sub-)discipline. Put bluntly, if Europe's economic model and diverse national growth regimes are essentially at odds with sustained life on the continent, what should policy-makers strive to be 'maximizing' on behalf of European citizens instead of growth or prosperity or welfare? And how to reorganize the European political economy to achieve such alternative objectives? What role for heterodox perspectives and other, more radical departures from the status quo crisis in this important endeavour (see, for example, Babic and Sharma 2023)?

The final, bigger question that one is left grappling with after engaging with the three reviewed books can thus perhaps be formulated as follows, in light of Bongardt and Torres's (2023, 2) assertion that 'European politicians may need to dare to take more risks' in order to 'exit [the EU's] permanent crisis mode' (Bongardt and Torres 2024, 364). Yet, to what extent should teachers and students of Europe not equally 'dare to take more risks' themselves and be prompted out of their intellectual comfort zones – for example, by engaging with more diverse voices in the scholarly debate, including non-European and non-Western perspectives as well as decolonial approaches (Kundnani 2023; LeBaron et al. 2020)? Given that two of the three textbooks are second editions already (while another is marketed as a first edition), one can plausibly hope that each stands as a living

and continuous project rather than as a finalized oeuvre. The same might be said of the EU's evolving polity and the sub-discipline of European political economy that studies its evolution – both of which appear back in high demand, paradoxically revitalized and expanding with each existential crisis.

## Note

1. For full disclosure, it should be noted that I have contributed to this separate volume by providing one of the 28 essays. If I were to base an assignment on said essay, which deals with the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Parliament, the essay prompt could be formulated along the lines of “The Monetary Dialogue between the ECB and the European Parliament is little more than a Monetary Monologue”. Discuss, for example (Diessner 2023).

## Disclosure statement

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