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Theorising the ‘migration fix’: workerisation and exclusion in the European border regime

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary European border regime is shaped by an apparently paradoxical set of developments: while the securitisation of borders and the violent exclusion of displaced people intensifies, the demand for foreign workers is rapidly growing, driven by severe labour shortages across European economies. In this article, we develop the concept of the migration fix to study how different economic and political logics interact at the heart of European bordering and generate a range of new policies and practices. We theorise this concept drawing from the critical literature on racial capitalism, border studies and the political economy of migration, to understand how border regimes operate within broader logics of capitalist development and function as temporary and unstable fixes between different interests and tendencies, sustaining nativist political projects while creating opportunities for the exploitation of migrant labour. We develop this concept in relation to contemporary EU and member state policies in Germany, Italy and Greece, showing how a set of migration and border policies seek to reconcile business pressures for greater labour migration with the further securitisation of bordering, through the negotiation of partnerships with neighbouring countries and the drive towards what we term the workerisation of asylum seekers and refugees.

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Introduction

The current expansion of the European border regime¹ is underpinned by a seemingly contradictory set of dynamics. The securitisation of borders and narratives of ‘migration crisis’ have become increasingly central to European politics (Bilgin 2022). This is driven both by the mounting of electoral projects by the far right around ethno-nationalism and territorial sovereignty and by the adoption on the part of European elites of ‘civilisational’ discourses, whereby the EU is conceived of as a ‘project of European civilisation’ (Macron 2019) and bordering is framed as key to ‘promoting our European way of life’ (Commission 2019, see Kundnani 2023, pp. 141–6). This has contributed to the erosion of the right to refugee protection, the increased use of detention and the expansion and offshoring of border policing – in line with a global trend towards what Mountz (2020) terms the ‘death of asylum’. It has also created new borderscapes that displaced populations are forced to traverse under increasingly dangerous conditions. A second dynamic is however also at play: European economies have, especially since the COVID pandemic, experienced severe labour shortages in

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sectors ranging from high-end manufacturing to construction, agriculture and tourism (FT 2022). A recent Commission report (2023) warns that these ‘shortages will likely increase with the projected decline in [Europe’s] working age population’ – predicting a long-term dependence of European capitalism on extra-EU workers. This creates an apparent paradox at the heart of European bordering: how does it secure the bases for continued capitalist development, most notably in relation to its growing need for foreign workers, while sustaining a racial hegemonic project which is increasingly premised on the exclusion and securitisation of migrants?

In this article, we make two key contributions which address this paradox: first, we develop a conceptual framework – that of the migration fix – through which the contemporary European border regime and its contradictory elements can be analysed and clarified. We do this by bringing into conversation two strands of critical scholarship which have addressed European border policy through the lens of political economy. The first has explored the role that bordering plays in the construction of racial hegemonic orders built around ideas of white European nativism (see Narayan 2017, Danewid 2022). The second has focused on the role of borders as mechanisms for value-extraction, to be realised through the making and managing of racialised surplus populations (see Bhattacharyya 2018, Rajaram 2018, Martin 2021). The concept of the migration fix, which we first introduced in relation to humanitarianism (Bird and Schmid 2023) and which manifests concretely as a multitude of migration *fixes*, clarifies the role of border regimes within contemporary capitalism as well as makes sense of the contradictory and unstable interaction between different political, racial and economic logics. Specifically, we define migration fixes as regulatory projects which operate through the creation and management of surplus populations for the purposes of capital accumulation and in relation to political projects of racial hegemony. We also discuss them as precarious and unstable solutions which are open to contestation.

Our second contribution consists in the empirical application of this concept to current developments in European bordering. We argue that greater reliance on migrant workers, on the one hand, and the further intensification of securitised and racialised bordering, on the other, do not necessarily stand in a contradictory relation with each other – but neither is the relation between them stable or settled. Rather, their interaction is concretely articulated in a myriad of migration and border policies at the European and member state levels which seek to reconcile distinct political and economic pressures arising from business and nativist political projects, as well as respond to the advocacy and struggles of displaced people and migrant-solidarity campaigns. We trace the uneasy and contingent mediation between these forces and interests in the deployment of a set of migration fixes relating both to Europe’s ‘external’ bordering – through the negotiation of deals with origin and transit countries – and ‘internal’ border and integration policy – through the blending of refugee and labour market policy and drive towards what we term the workerisation of asylum seekers and refugees.²

Methodologically, we follow Stuart Hall ([1980] 2019, p. 197) in emphasising the conjuncture as the level of analysis at which the articulation of different structural logics and social interests can be ascertained in concrete form (see Casas-Cortés *et al.* 2015, p. 58). As such, we develop the concept of the migration fix through an empirical analysis of the contemporary European border regime, focusing on the ways in which the different logics and pressures discussed above are mediated within it. We do this by analysing recent policy initiatives at EU and member state levels relating to both ‘external’ and ‘internal’ migration policy. At EU level, we look at Commission and Council reports, speeches and programmes regarding labour migration and externalised border policy. At the member state level, we focus on policy initiatives in three key countries – Germany, Italy and Greece – in the areas of bilateral cooperation with third countries as well as domestic migration policy. We selected these countries because, as well as being central actors in the so-called European migration crisis and its aftermath, they occupy different positions at the core, semi-periphery and periphery of European capitalism. The engagement with multiple countries makes it possible to account for the common trends in European border policy as well as national peculiarities. Exploring different modes of workerisation in Germany, Italy and Greece, in other words, is valuable in showing

how migration fixes vary according to distinct political and economic conditions. The analysis of member state policy consists in a combination of document analysis of national policy, media reports, grey literature and secondary literature. This is supplemented, in the case of Greece, by field-notes collected between 2017 and 2024 by the second author as a part of a longer-term project.

The article is organised as follows. In the first section, we review existing work on the political economy of bordering and reflect on a missing dialogue between contributions exploring the role of borders as mechanisms of value-extraction and those that emphasise their political-ideological character and implication in the construction of racial hegemonic orders. The second section advances the concept of the migration fix as a way of bringing these two strands of critique into dialogue with each other. The third section illustrates how the concept of the migration fix can be deployed to make sense of contemporary developments in European bordering. In the conclusion, we reflect on the insights generated by a conjunctural analysis of the European border regime and draw out paths for future research.

Critiquing the European border regime

We begin with a discussion of two strands of analysis in the existing critical literature on migration and bordering in Europe, each of which analyses a distinctive aspect of the political economy of the European border regime.

The first strand studies the ways in which anti-immigrant sentiments and the building-up of restrictive bordering practices have, over recent decades, become central to right-wing nativist political projects organised around the advancement of the interests of white European majorities.³ Ida Danewid (2022, pp. 22–3; 28), for instance, argues that ‘the expansion of European border security’ and the production of ‘a racist common sense that sees migrants as the cause of Europe’s current socio-economic problems’ should be seen as part of a wider attempt to ‘reconstitute racial hegemony in a time of crisis’. Contemporary migration politics in Europe, then, is read against the backdrop of the breakdown of the post-war European social-democratic compromise, the retrenchment of the welfare state, and the prolonged effects of deindustrialisation, austerity and rising inequality which have characterised the neoliberal era (Cross 2021, pp. 116–21). These developments have progressively eroded what Du Bois (1935) termed the ‘wages of whiteness’ – the material and symbolic benefits that elites in the Global North provided to the white working and middle classes to bind them to a common national-imperial project – and thus undermined the ‘racial contract between capital and white labour’ (Dawson 2016, pp. 154–55, Narayan 2017, Danewid 2022, p. 22). In the words of Narayan (2017, p. 2491), the increasingly virulent politicisation of migration forms part of a broader elite attempt to ‘re-supply the wages of whiteness in the absence of wages’ through nationalism and the scapegoating of migrants and minority communities (Shilliam 2018, pp. 154–63, Favell 2022, pp. 150–53).

The construction of a European refugee crisis can also be understood in these terms, especially considering the centring of European states and their supposed inability to cope with increased numbers of people seeking asylum (Bilgin 2022). The language of ‘crisis’ speaks to ideological and economic anxieties of the Global North as an imagined space of whiteness that is being encroached upon (De Genova 2018, Bilgin 2022). Furthermore, as governments look to construct a narrative about the ending of ‘crisis’ for the purposes of political campaigning, discourses are adopted which emphasise the need to ‘clean up’ migration, sanitising spaces and places through reduced ‘flows’ of people (Bird and Obradović-Wochnik 2024).

Underlying all these readings is the insight that migration and bordering practices operate as primary sites for the production of racial meanings and the boundaries of nationhood in colonial and post-colonial societies (de Noronha 2019, El-Enany 2020). These racial constructs, in turn, play a central role in contemporary political attempts on the right to build new racial hegemonic blocs across Europe in the face of prolonged economic crisis and social fragmentation (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018).

A second strand of critical analysis, meanwhile, looks at the ways in which borders constitute 'extreme zones of profit extraction' (Franck 2018, p. 200). That is, it studies how borders create opportunities for the appropriation of the unfree labour of migrants and displaced people, as well as constitute mechanisms for value creation through the containment, housing and servicing of displaced populations (see Kreichauf 2023).

In this regard, scholars like Bhattacharyya (2018), Rajaram (2018), Pradella and Cillo (2021), Walia (2021) and Frydenlund and Dunn (2022) deploy the concepts of relative surplus populations and racial capitalism to show how border regimes in the Global North secure the 'commodified inclusion of migrants and refugees as undocumented or temporary workers with deliberately deflated labour power to guarantee capital accumulation' (Walia 2021, p. 85). These contributions explore the different ways in which restrictive bordering practices and the illegalisation of displaced people respond to capitalist logics by creating the conditions for the super-exploitation of unfree labour (Pradella and Cillo 2021, p. 484). They show how immigrants are relied upon to fill particular 'low paid [and] dangerous labour niches' in sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture and logistics, as well as being frequently employed in social and domestic care (Frydenlund and Dunn 2022, p. 6). Migrant labour thereby plays a crucial role in the production and social reproduction of capitalist order.

These two strands of critical inquiry each shed light on an important facet of contemporary bordering and reveal the complex imbrication of migration systems in broader structures of racial politics, colonial extraction and capital accumulation. When viewed in combination, however, they raise the question of how to make sense of and relate these different dimensions and rationales of bordering and migration management. How, for instance, should the interaction between the political-ideological aspect of the border regime and its economic function be understood? This, in turn, feeds into a broader set of questions over the degree of systemic (in)coherence which characterises contemporary bordering. Should the border regime be understood as a relatively coherent apparatus within which various racial, economic and political logics combine and reinforce one another? Or is it better understood as a fluid, unstable and contested institutional space that is characterised by the accumulation of a variety of distinct and contradictory pressures and interests?

In answering these questions, we identify two orientations in the critical literature on migration. On the one hand, scholars working through the lens of racial capitalism tend to emphasise how the exploitation of migrants' labour is *compatible with* and, in fact, *enabled by* their racialised construction as surplus populations and their containment, illegalisation and repelling (Rajaram 2018, Goodfellow 2023). This insight counters conventional framings in mainstream migration studies which posit the existence of a 'trade-off' between 'strong economic pressures for openness and strong political, legal, and security pressures for closure' in liberal migration regimes (Hollifield and Foley 2022, p. 4). As Walia (2021, p. 6) explains, 'contrary to common analysis, borders being simultaneously monetised and militarised [...] are not contradictory juxtapositions'. In fact, it is the very closure and militarisation of borders, as well as the racial ideologies mobilised to justify them, which create possibilities for capital accumulation (Rajaram 2018, p. 634). On the other hand, critical scholars drawing on the Foucauldian and autonomist traditions tend to instead place the emphasis on the heterogeneity and 'messiness' of border regimes, conceptualising migration policy as 'a contested policy arena in which a multiplicity of actors compete over influence, budgets and agendas' (Scheel 2018, p. 272). Sceptical of theorisations which give too much weight to overarching systemic logics, they favour instead the conceptualisation of border regimes as 'an assemblage of actors, practices, relations and infrastructure' which escape singular structural determination (Martin 2021, p. 744). This approach foregrounds not the coherence but rather the 'imperfection, precarity and "productive failure"' of border regimes, thereby also recognising the autonomy and creativity of migrant struggles which 'escape and exceed the control capacities of the existing border regime' (Scheel 2018, p. 268, 273; see also Mezzadra and Nielson 2013, p. 165, De Genova 2017). In this second view, the border regime is conceptualised as 'a site of constant encounter, tension, conflict and contestation' (Casas-Cortes *et al.* 2015, p. 69) and critical analysis is geared towards

capturing ‘a multiplicity of actors without attributing a systemic logic to their practices’ (Scheel 2018, p. 272).

We do not want to overstate the distinction between these two approaches, since, in actual practice, critical migration scholars rely on a combination of both orientations – at times emphasising the systemic character of bordering, at others its fragility and contested character. Identifying the two orientations does, however, bring to the fore a central tension in the analysis and critique of border regimes. Both approaches, we believe, contain important insights as to the operations of contemporary border practices. The former approach emphasises that the militarisation of borders, the spread of racialised ‘moral panics’ about refugees, and the economic exploitation of migrant labour are not separate developments but rather can be understood as internally related strategies in the regulation and management of different crisis tendencies in European capitalism. The latter, meanwhile, warns against ascribing too much systemic coherence and effective control to the European border regime, thereby obscuring the multiplicity of actors, decisions and interests involved in its constitution, reproduction and contestation. The challenge, then, is in how these two insights can be accommodated within a framework of analysis which interrogates the various dimensions and relations of contemporary European bordering without presuming that a neat ‘fit’ always exists between them – or that they can be explained by reference to a singular, overarching logic. The key is to recognise that the exploitation of migrant labour for the purposes of capital accumulation and the advancement of racial hegemonic projects built around white European nativism – as well as the imperial, post-colonial and security dimensions of bordering – do not neatly map on to each other but rather stand in complex relationships of articulation which can only be determined at the level of conjunctural analysis (Hall [1980] 2019).

What we seek to formulate in the next section, then, is a conceptual tool through which the interaction between these logics can be interrogated in specific spatio-temporal contexts. In particular, we develop the concept of the migration fix (Bird and Schmid 2023) as a way of analysing the operations of the European border regime.

Migration fix(es)

In the early 1980s, the Marxist geographer David Harvey (1981, 2001, p. 24) developed the concept of the spatial fix to make sense of the ways in which global capitalism deploys various forms of ‘geographical expansion and geographical restructuring’ to manage its inner contradictions. According to Harvey (2001), capitalism periodically looks for ways to temporarily solve its crisis tendencies – be it the overaccumulation of capital, the emergence of labour shortages or the requirement for cheap materials – through the opening of new export markets, the offshoring of production or the increase of the size of the labour force. One such fix, he observed, consists in the mass movement of workers – either by dispersing labour surpluses on to new spaces of capitalist expansion, as in the case of nineteenth century European settler colonialism, or by the ‘importation of cheap labour [...] into centers of capitalist development’ (Harvey 2001, p. 26; see also Silver 2003, Scott 2013). Building on Harvey’s initial insight on the role of labour mobility as a spatial fix and inspired by Gilmore’s (2007) theorisation of the prison fix as a strategy for the management of racialised surplus populations, we develop in this section the concept of the migration fix as a way of conceptualising the role of bordering in contemporary global capitalism. We do so based on our previous work (Bird and Schmid 2023) as well as drawing from a broader critical scholarship which has sought to interrogate migration practices as forms of spatial fixing (Rajaram 2018, Walia 2021, Kreichauf 2023).

The key idea behind the concept of the migration fix is to understand bordering practices and the management of migration as distinctive spatial fixes which operate through the creation, containment, illegalisation and selective integration of surplus populations into local labour markets. Borders serve to spatially regulate the mobility of populations to manage the uneven effects of global capitalist development, to sustain nativist projects of racial hegemony and to enable value-

extraction through the exploitation of migrants' unfree labour. What makes this distinct from Harvey's concept is that it does not just foreground the governing of populations for the purposes of capital accumulation, but also draws attention to its (oftentimes contradictory) interaction with various political projects of racial hegemony. In this way, bordering practices, as migration fixes, can be understood as regulatory projects which aim to provide short-term solutions to various social tensions and crisis tendencies while also creating opportunities for further capitalist expansion. As in Harvey's (2001, p. 24) conceptualisation, we too emphasise the fact that these fixes are precarious and ever-changing in response to contestation and shifts in political, cultural and economic conditions, as well as themselves creating new problems and tensions requiring further regulation.

Thus defined, the migration fix stretches and redefines Harvey's concept in several ways. First, migration fixes are constituted through a distinctive set of spatial practices which have less to do with the territorial expansion of capital's reach and more with the physical and regulatory reorganisation and segmentation of space. Borders as migration fixes, then, operate through the construction of physical infrastructure and complex institutional systems as well as multilateral international agreements which categorise populations and regulate their differential rights to mobility and selective access to labour markets and welfare provision. *Contra* the image of borders as the construction of unassailable fortresses, then, migration fixes operate through the institution of highly selective and differentiated systems for the regulation of human movement, wherein rights and mobility are granted to some populations and denied to others (Mezzadra and Nielson 2013, Scheel 2018, Favell 2022).⁴

Second, migration fixes cannot straightforwardly be traced back to the functional requirements of capitalist accumulation, but rather are produced through the unstable articulation of a multiplicity of social, political, racial and gendered logics and actors. We also want to avoid the danger of reproducing a sanitised and technocratic image of border regimes as the expression of wholly rational economic and political calculi. The risk here is that of concealing the intensity and extent of everyday cruelty and 'excess' violence that is involved in the maintenance of borders, and which represents a feature of racial capitalism more broadly (Melamed 2015, pp. 77–78). There is also the risk of overstating the stability and coherence of border regimes and concealing their intrinsic fragility and contingency – as well as the agency of the migrants who contest and push back against it (De Genova 2017). Border regimes are, after all, not well-oiled machines but rather the accumulation of a myriad of makeshift, stopgap solutions, constantly on the cusp of breaking down (McNevin 2022, p. 999). We therefore theorise the migration fix not as a singular and overarching plan but rather as a multiplicity of short-term solutions which use various techniques of segmentation, containment and differentiation of surplus populations to manage various social and economic problems – a series of tentative migration *fixes*, rather than a singular, stable migration *fix*.

Thirdly, the concept of the migration fix considers the role played by racialisation as a technique of bordering. Race is a key criterion associated with the construction and governing of relative surplus populations, operationalised through shifting legal categories such as nationality, ethnicity and country of origin. In this way, as Shilliam (2018, p. 171) notes, 'the distinction that renders some deserving of social security and welfare [as well as legal access] and others not is racialised so as to classify collectives in order to judge individuals'. The racialised construction of surplus groups is central both to the articulation of 'moral panics' and invasion narratives key to contemporary nativist politics and to the super-exploitation of migrant labour (Bhattacharyya 2018, pp. 126–38). It thereby constitutes a key technique through which bordering as a migration fix is constituted in contemporary European politics.

Defined in this way, we argue, the concept of the migration fix maintains a sensitivity to the fragility and messiness of borders while also clarifying the systemic imperatives, capitalist logics and social forces that they respond to. To substantiate this point, we proceed in the next section to analyse a set of migration fixes at the EU and member state level which constitute the concrete

way in which the different political, economic and social logics of European bordering are mediated in the current conjuncture.

‘We need a big fence and a big door’

In this section we return to the paradox we introduced at the start of the article. At the same time as European institutions and member states are increasingly invested in restrictive migration policies and civilisational narratives of protecting borders, pressure is mounting from business and political elites for Europe to attract higher numbers of foreign workers. The EU home affairs commissioner Ylva Johansson warned, in January 2024, that ‘legal migration should grow by more or less 1 million per year’ (AP 2024). In the following analysis, we show how these contrasting interests are managed through a set of migration fixes that relate to Europe’s ‘external’ and ‘internal’ bordering and consist in the simultaneous construction, in the words of the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, of ‘a big fence and a big door’ (FT 2024). We illustrate this point by examining formal and informal developments and policy initiatives in Germany, Italy and Greece, as well as ones developed by the EU.

In its ‘external’ bordering, the EU and its member-states are increasingly moving towards a ‘two-track policy of cracking down on irregular migration, while opening their doors to substantial numbers of legal migrants [*sic*] in order to ease labour market pressures’ (FT 2023). This involves EU-level initiatives and, more frequently, member state-led bilateral deals with third countries (Panebianco 2022, p. 1405). In terms of the former, migration management is now routinely embedded in EU trade agreements with third countries. In the Samoa Agreement, the EU’s overall framework for relations with African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, migration features as a central pillar, with the aim of implementing ‘a comprehensive and balanced approach to migration’ to ‘reap the benefits of safe, orderly and regular migration and mobility’ as well as ‘stem irregular migration’ (Council 2023, p. 20). The Commission (2022) has repeatedly emphasised the need to ‘develop labour mobility schemes with non-EU countries’ through the signing of ‘talent partnerships’ with countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Senegal and Nigeria. Crucially, these initiatives also include ‘reinforced migration management cooperation’ and ‘anti-smuggling operations’ to ‘reduce irregular migration’ (Council 2024). Meanwhile, member states have been actively pursuing bilateral agreements, often informal and ad hoc, with key origin and transit countries (Panebianco 2022, p. 1405). These include cooperation in combating irregular migration alongside – as incentive or reward – the opening of legal, although often circular and temporary, routes for labour migration (Cardwell and Dickson 2023, pp. 3121–22). Greece, for instance, is pursuing ‘labour mobility pacts’ with Vietnam, Bangladesh, Georgia and Moldova, with the stated aim, in the words of Migration Minister Kairidis, of blending ‘strict border controls and fighting [migrant trafficking] with facilitating legal migration’ (InfoMigrants 2023). Italy has also been active in this area, using a policy tool it had already relied upon in the 1990s and early 2000s: that of annual entry quotas (Fontana and Rosina 2024, p. 16). In July 2023, Italy’s Meloni government announced that it would issue up to 452,000 work permits to non-EU nationals over a three-year period, to fill labour shortages in logistics, tourism, agriculture and domestic care (Governo Italiano 2023 [authors’ translation]). Crucially, it stated that it would ‘reserve specific quotas for workers from countries of origin or transit that sign agreements to [...] counteract irregular migration’ (Ibidem).

The significance of these initiatives – and what constitutes them as migration fixes – is that they all seek to reconcile the increased need for labour migration with the continued commitment to exclusionary bordering practices. In this way, the recruitment of non-EU workers *reinforces* rather than *softens* the securitisation of borders – as well as being used as an incentive for third countries to take on additional responsibilities in Europe’s externalised migration controls. The Commission’s (2020) language of ‘attracting skills’, incentivising ‘labour mobility’ and making the EU ‘more attractive for talent from around the world’ – and national governments’ embracing of legal migration quotas – sit easily alongside nativist calls for the protection of Europe’s borders and the defence

of its 'cultural roots and identity' (Fdl 2024 [authors' translation]). In practice, they directly buttress a project of externalised bordering which results in everyday human rights violations in North Africa and the Sahel (Bilgin 2022, p. 56) and the Mediterranean becoming 'a graveyard' (Sciurba, quoted in InfoMigrants 2020). This dual focus on both violently excluding and eagerly inviting different migrant groups, often from the same countries, is neatly captured in Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis' declaration that 'welcome in Greece are only those we choose' (Reuters 2019) and Italian Prime Minister Meloni's recent statement that 'illegal migrants are the enemies of legal ones' (ANSA 2024 [author's translation]). This highlights the centrality of the management of surplus populations to European border policy and to attempts to find workable 'fixes' to contrasting political and economic imperatives.

Similar dynamics can also be seen in 'internal' bordering and integration policy, where a different set of migration fixes are being developed, involving what Maaroufi (2017, p. 19) has described as 'an increasing convergence of labour market and refugee policies'. This convergence is coming about through two mirroring developments: what Dines and Rigo (2016) call the refugeeisation of migrant labour; and an inverse but simultaneous development which we term the workerisation of refugees and asylum seekers. The former process has been observed by Dines (2023) in the context of the Italian agri-food industry. It consists in the "refugeeisation" of the workforce' (Dines and Rigo 2016), namely the increasing use of humanitarian discourses, measures and practices in the governing of migrant labour. This means that migrant work is increasingly regulated through a legal and political framework which is not that of labour rights, employment law and industrial relations, but rather one of humanitarian protection. The resulting situation is captured in the striking story, told by Dines (2023, p. 81), of a 'Reception Centre for Seasonal Migrant Citizens' in the region of Basilicata which is administered not by the state or by employers, but by the Red Cross.

Meanwhile, a second development is also taking place which we term workerisation. We understand workerisation as a process whereby growing emphasis is placed on the participation of asylum seekers and refugees in labour markets and on the development of formal and informal measures to compel their participation in economic sectors affected by shortages of workers. The specific legal frameworks under which workerisation as a migration fix is implemented varies country by country, depending on different economic and governance models. In Greece and Italy, both characterised by large informal economies and high numbers of undocumented migrants, it takes the form of the issuing of *post-hoc* 'legalisation programmes' aimed at regularising the status of irregular migrants and channelling them towards specific sectors (Cheliotis 2017, Bonizzoni 2018, p. 55). Legalisation campaigns, which were routinely carried out across southern Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s, have recently returned as a favoured tool of migration management (Bonizzoni 2018). The Italian government issued an 'amnesty' in 2020 targeting irregular migrants active in agriculture and domestic care (Governo Italiano 2020) and the Greek parliament approved the regularisation of 30,000 undocumented migrants, primarily agricultural workers, in December 2023 (InfoMigrants 2023).

Crucially, as Floros and Jørgensen (2020) have shown in relation to Greece and Devitt (2023) has argued in relation to Italy, these legalisation programmes have become increasingly selective, requiring renewal at shorter intervals and, in the case of Greece, containing geographic and occupational restrictions which keep migrant workers in a protracted state of precarity and under constant threat of deportation. Regularisations thereby function, as migration fixes, both as a disciplining tool for governing displaced populations and as what Bonizzoni (2018, p. 48) terms a 'side-' or 'back-door' labour migration policy. They operate, furthermore, through a proliferation of different categories, forestalling permanency in favour of a fluid process which keeps migrants moving between legal, semi-legal and illegal status (Kapsalis 2018). The exposure of migrant workers to precarious and undeclared work in the shadow economy is therefore less a case of policy failure than a tacitly tolerated policy outcome, functional to maintaining profitability in labour-intensive, low-investment sectors such as agriculture, construction and hospitality (Kapsalis 2018, p. 49; Pradella and Cillo 2021, p. 485).

Our empirical work in Greece supports this reading, showing numerous instances in which workerisation occurs *informally*, with residents of camps being offered work on farms, in factories and in the tourism industry before they have been granted the legal right to work (Author field-notes 2023, 2024). In a co-produced report, the Assembly of Solidarity with Migrants (2024) found a ‘number of seemingly-closed warehouses [that] operate near the refugee camps of Malakasa, Oinofyta (currently closed) and Ritsona’. In addition to this, we have learned of residents in island camps being informally offered the possibility to transfer to camps in mainland Greece to work in factories that rely on refugees and asylum seekers as a source of labour (Author field-notes 2023). The Assembly of Solidarity with Migrants (2024) found that ‘the daily wage [for people in this situation] is between €30 and €40, holidays and sick leaves are not paid and an amount is arbitrarily deducted if arriving late at work. On the job there are no safety measures or safety equipment’. The testimonies gathered also show that ‘undocumented workers are preferred in farming and in [...] warehouse work, [where] companies offer no contract, saving on taxes, insurance and contributions’ (*Ibid*). The recourse of local businesses to illegalised surplus populations highlights how the formal and informal workerisation of refugees and asylum seekers operate as migration fixes, sustaining the production model of the Greek and other southern European economies (Cheliotis 2017, p. 84, Pradella and Cillo 2021).

In Germany, meanwhile, a more formalised mode of workerisation is taking shape, which is geared towards the specific needs of the German economy and involves a systematic re-orientation of its refugee regime with the aim of connecting ‘the spheres of asylum, labour market, and vocational training’ (Fontanari 2022a, p. 118). As studied by Fontanari (2022a, 2022b) and Maaroufi (2017, pp. 15–6, 2022, p. 1), the German state has, since 2015, started to ‘emphasise refugees’ role as potential labour market participants’ and has gradually shifted its approach ‘from prohibition, through enticement, to finally, coercion to work’. Through a series of policies informed by the workfare regime which make immigration status dependent on work, refugees and asylum seekers are pressured to develop skills, qualifications and competencies which meet the needs of the German labour market (Maaroufi 2017, pp. 24–25). This system, which Fontanari (2022a) terms one of ‘Neo-liberal Asylum’, relies on various forms of racialisation. Most notably, it is based on the categorisation of asylum claims based on the applicant’s country of origin, creating hierarchies between those deemed to have ‘good’ or ‘bad prospects to stay’ (*Gute oder schlechte Bleibeperspektive*) (BAMF 2016). Whereas the former are deemed to be deserving of protection and channelled into employment and vocational training, the latter are subjected to extended waiting times and the threat of deportation (Maaroufi 2017, p. 27, Fontanari 2022b, pp. 773–4). The production of new categories and legal statuses – such as the ‘toleration permit’ for rejected asylum seekers pursuing vocational training (*Ausbildungsduldung*) (BAMF 2023) – further aims for the subordinate integration of displaced people into the German labour market, under different levels of conditionality, deportability and precariousness (Schwenken 2021, p. 150, Fontanari 2022a).

What these examples of contemporary migration policy in Germany, Italy and Greece show is that the securitisation of migration driven by nativist politics and the renewed emphasis on the recruitment of non-EU workers do not necessarily stand in a contradictory relationship with each other – but neither are they spontaneously reconciled in a stable manner. Rather, they are articulated through a set of migration fixes new and old which, in relation to the German asylum system, ‘can be interpreted as a political compromise between the forces belonging to the [...] economic sectors, the claims supporting refugees’ rights to stay and live a dignified life [...], and the attempt to control and govern migration in a restrictive way’ (Fontanari 2022b, p. 779). Similarly, our research in Greece shows, the workerisation of displaced people not only takes place through policies intended to maintain high levels of precarity and reliance on state benevolence, but also by way of driving people into the informal economy, facilitating the movement of labour between refugee camps and factories, and, importantly, back again. These migration fixes are, at the same time, also responses to campaigns by migrant groups and solidarity networks for better rights and conditions, such as the struggles for mass regularisation in Greece since 2008 (King 2016, p. 58–59); the increase, since 2011, in strikes and grassroots unionisation amongst migrant workers in

the south of Italy (Pradella and Cillo 2021, p. 490); and the advocacy of civil society and humanitarian actors around a 'welcome culture' (*Willkommenskultur*) in Germany (Schwenken 2021, p. 160).

Conclusion

In this article we have shown how the concept of the migration fix can be used to make sense of the tension between different political and economic interests at the heart of the European border regime. This concept reveals the ways in which different dynamics of capitalist accumulation, political nativism and securitised governance interact in complex, messy and unstable ways within particular spatio-temporal conjunctures. Concretely, we have applied the migration fix to the contemporary European conjuncture to clarify how migration policies ranging from the signing of talent partnerships with third countries to the workerisation of refugees and asylum seekers are deployed to reconcile the further securitisation and racialised exclusion of displaced populations with a greater emphasis on their recruitment as workers to fill labour shortages across Europe – while also responding to political contestation by migrants and solidarity movements. These migration fixes, we emphasise, are by no means stable and lasting solutions to Europe's crisis tendencies and contradictions. European bordering is, after all, not purely an exercise in rational state planning, or 'reducible to a top-down form of population control' (McNevin 2022, p. 999). Rather, it is riddled with tensions, always on the cusp of breaking down. In practical terms, it is far from certain that attempts by European policymakers and national governments to marry a securitised and exclusionary border regime with greater reliance on non-EU workers – providing the bases for further capitalist development while legitimating a racialised project of European civilisation – will secure sufficient popular consent across the continent. Nor is guaranteed to work economically, as a *panacea* to the structural weaknesses of European capitalism. One would also do well not to discount the agency of displaced peoples themselves, as well as the power of transversal alliances of activists, migrants and local populations to challenge and subvert the European border regime (King 2016; Tazzioli 2020).

In this unstable context, we contribute to a critical political economy of migration that makes legible the logics of operation in contemporary bordering and highlights the violence but also the fissures and cracks in its functioning – without presuming that everything can be neatly explained. It simultaneously keeps within its sight the economic tendencies and requirements of capital accumulation, the political projects of racial hegemony, and the processes of race-making themselves – not to postulate an overarching explanation but to reveal the contradictions that characterise European bordering. Such a perspective must also expand beyond the analysis laid out in this article and investigate Europe's migration fixes in relation to global entanglements of imperialism, postcolonial extraction, and environmental collapse (see Pradella and Cillo 2021, İşleyen and Qadim 2023).

To conclude, what the concept of the migration fix offers is a tool to draw out the existing tensions at the heart of European bordering and to make visible the violence within it. The racialised violence witnessed at Europe's borders is not an incidental by-product of policy decisions but rather is inherent to the underpinning logics of the border regime. Making invisible policy choices visible is a necessary but not sufficient condition for them to be challenged. It can open opportunities for political contestation, while acknowledging that there is no guarantee that breakdowns in border policy will result in their amelioration or dismantling. Cracks and ruptures in the governance of borders are just as likely to result in more acute deployments of the instruments of violence and in the expunging of the few remaining safeguards of international labour rights and humanitarian and refugee protection.

Notes

1. We understand the European border regime as a multi-level institutional ensemble of bordering practices which attempts to construct a common European space and to manage the movement of populations across and into it (De Genova 2017).

2. We theorise workerisation – as distinct from workerism – as related to concepts such as the ‘economisation’ of migration policy. It puts specific emphasis on the processes by which migrants are driven to become workers. For a similar use of the term see Kapsalis (2018, p. 82).
3. It should be noted that whiteness and cultural belonging in the European context are contested categories, the boundaries of which are constantly shifting (Bilgin 2022). Whiteness, in this sense, refers to the political construction of identity as belonging or not belonging and deserving or not deserving (Shilliam 2018).
4. Our account proceeds from the perspective of migration-receiving countries in the Global North. This provides only a partial view and must be integrated with the perspective of migration-sending countries as well, where emigration can serve as its own migration fix, responding to problems of social unrest and mass unemployment as well as generating remittances.

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