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Explicit and Implicit Rules of Competition: An Interdisciplinary Framework for Analysis

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Explicit and Implicit Rules of Competition: An Interdisciplinary Framework for Analysis

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Abstract

Competition structures contemporary societies as an omnipresent organizing principle yet is often understood as a neutral technical mechanism. This paper develops a theoretical framework on competition as a social institution structured by explicit and implicit rules that systematically reproduce power relations under the guise of fair selection. While explicit rules govern formal processes and are accessible to all participants, implicit rules remain concealed yet fundamentally determine competitive practices and outcomes. These rule types are distinguished by the "border of what can be said (and done)". Through three empirical competitive formats examining housing markets, EU policymaking, and global development, we demonstrate how this distinction illuminates the mechanisms through which competition legitimizes social inequalities. Our framework bridges theoretical approaches while accounting for competition's variability and ambiguity. By rendering implicit rules visible and contestable, this analysis challenges neoliberal instrumentalization and reveals competition's deep entanglement with power relations in modern capitalist societies.

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Keywords *competition, institutions, explicit and implicit rules, interdisciplinary framework, power relations*

1. Introduction

In contemporary societies, competition and competitive formats are ubiquitous, constituting an “ecology of competition” (Arora-Jonsson et al. 2021) across multiple domains (Hartmann and Kjaer 2015). This encompasses labour relations, sporting events, educational (Tauschek 2013; Wetzel 2013; Musselin 2018) and healthcare systems, dating applications (Wetzel 2013), and economic interactions between nations (Cerny 1997; Werron 2012; Kapeller et al. 2019) or multinational corporations, which all adhere to competitive logics to varying extents. Competition as a principle of social order thus, is deeply intertwined with the functioning of our capitalist societies (Backhouse 1990; Shaikh 2016; Gane 2020) and modernity more generally (Hearn 2021). The increasing importance of competition has to be understood as a three-step process: Capitalism universalized competition as an allocation mechanism for economic exchanges, while the transformation of social power – from aristocratic to democratic rule – gave rise to competition as a principle of social organization. The rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s then led to an expansion of competitive formats in all areas of life. Today competition is negotiated in public, political and economic discourses as an organizing force that should guarantee social and technological progress through selection as well as equality of opportunity (Pühringer et al. 2021; Koos and Sachweh 2019). However, critical research highlights that competitive formats in capitalist, modern societies tend to reproduce social power relations and structures while legitimising existing social inequalities at different scales (Ergen and Kohl 2020). This paper asks how competition, and more specifically different competitive formats, reproduce existing power relations, and what can be learnt from an interdisciplinary perspective in this regard.

Societies developed specific sets of rules to regulate, constitute and act (in) competition (Ergen and Kohl 2020). From an institutionalist perspective, such sets of rules that structure human interactions are described by the notion of institution. In this sense, we conceptualise competition as a social institution structured by explicit and implicit rules. This distinction is predicated on the observation that certain rules of competition are made explicit and readily comprehensible to all competitors (explicit rules), while others are less readily discernible and consequently render the trajectory of competitive outcomes opaque to the relevant actors (implicit rules). It is these implicit rules that collectively with the explicit rules, shape the outcomes and practices of competition. In this sense, the terms explicit and implicit refer to the struggles surrounding the legitimising and negotiating aspects of competition. Focusing on these rules and their distinction, which is understood here as the border of what can be said (and done) (Jäger 2001), helps us to better understand the process by which social inequalities are reproduced through competition.

Due to its omnipresent and overarching character across all social domains, research focusing on competition is and also needs to be conducted by different disciplines and research traditions in the social sciences and humanities. And to comprehend the intricacies of competition in its various formats, research findings and results must be discussed in an interdisciplinary manner. We argue that the concept of explicit and implicit rules can provide an interdisciplinary framework

for discussing competitive outcomes and practices in various contexts. This approach can provide valuable insights into how competition contributes to reproduce social power relations.

To present our argument, we first provide an overview of competition research and clarify our definition of competition. The subsequent section of the paper sets out to delineate our central concept of explicit and implicit rules and use it to shed light on three distinct competitive formats: competition for housing, competition of ideas and global competition. The final section of the paper synthesises the results into an analytical framework that facilitates the interdisciplinary analysis of competition and competitive formats.

2. Competition, Institutions and Rules

In accordance with the broad societal significance of competition, the concept has received attention from various social science scholars. Yet, theorising competition differs according to the historical and disciplinary context. Different research traditions, within and across disciplines, are reflected in the scope, methodology and normative stances they take towards competition (Altreiter et al. 2025): In economics, competition has mainly been linked to the analysis of markets since the professionalization of the discipline in the 19th century. Most analyses and analytical models are built on an idealized form of competition, suggesting efficiency gains under ‘perfect competition’ (Jessop 2015a; 2015b; Gräbner-Radkowsch and Pühringer 2021). Only since the 1970s competitive formats outside the market have been assessed using the ‘economic approach’ (Becker 1976). However, other social sciences have also been interested in competition since the 19th century (Berman 2013): Spencer, Weber, and Simmel extended the concept of competition beyond economic theory, treating it as a broader sociological principle (Hearn 2021, 377). Political scientists, sociologists and cultural anthropologists analyse broad societal dynamics associated with competition in the non-economic and economic field, but also concrete competitive formats (Rosa 2006; Simmel 2008; Tauschek 2013; 2012; Jessop 2015b; Bürkert et al. 2019). Moreover, competition has been used as a heuristic to understand the role of ideas and different actors in policymaking (Martimort and Semenov 2008; Berman 2013; Izzo et al. 2023). Recently, scholars have also analysed competition as a mode of (meta-)governance, particularly in the neoliberal era (Foucault 2010; Jessop 2015b), focusing on how it is implemented and stabilized through political action and how it affects individual and collective actors’ subjectivities.

Regarding the effects of competition, scholars reach very different conclusions: Most economists use descriptive concepts in their analysis and emphasize the beneficial character of competition. In this respect, impeding monopoly power, incentives for innovation, (long-term) efficiency-gains, productivity growth and well-being are mentioned (Jaffe 1977; Ergen and Kohl 2020; Gräbner-Radkowsch and Pühringer 2021; Hager et al. 2022). Some economists stress the negative implications of competition such as objectification and alienation (Marx 2009), a waste of resources (Veblen 1927), regional polarisation (Gräbner-Radkowsch et al. 2023; Gräbner et al. 2020) and a reduction in social and/or environmental standards through a ‘race-to-the-bottom’ (Shleifer 2004). Other social scientists argue that competition creates pressure on individual

performance (e.g., subjectification of competition, Bröckling (2016) and Pühringer and Wolfmayr (2024)), lead to insecurity (Nullmeier 2000; Rosa 2006; Tauschek 2012; 2013; Davies 2014) or tends to contribute to the reproduction of existing inequalities (Ergen and Kohl 2020). Although these examples are by no means exhaustive, they illustrate the polarised nature of the debate on the effects of competition.

Attempts to bridge disciplinary and research tradition related barriers in competition research, as is the interest of this paper, are sparse: Altreiter et al. (2025) offer an interdisciplinary attempt to delineate competition, developing a minimal definition of competition facilitating interdisciplinary discussion. Furthermore, Werron (2015), Jessop (2015b), Gane (2020) and Hearn (2021) are noteworthy. In all these works, competition is not something innately 'natural' but must be understood in societal contexts. Furthermore, Hearn (2021) argues that competition is not merely a neoliberal phenomenon but a deeply institutionalized feature of modern social organization and a commonsensical mode of social interaction. Similarly, Jessop (2015b) engages in an analysis of the importance of competition for the structuring of modern society. However, he contends that the functioning of competition as a principle of social, economic, and political organization is highly complex, making both its operation and (normative) effects difficult to evaluate (Jessop 2015b). Particularly in inter- or transdisciplinary research, this issue arises because different research traditions employ varying concepts or terms for similar matters. Therefore, Jessop (2015b) underlines the need to establish frames and categories to understand competition.

Consequently, we propose not to formulate yet another unifying theory of competition and not to attempt once more to integrate all approaches, but rather to delineate an interdisciplinary concept. Following Hearn (2021) we conceptualise competition as an institution since this best accounts for its deep social embeddedness. Drawing on Hodgson's (2019; 2006) taxonomic definition of institutions, institutions are "socially operative (rather than merely declared) systems of rules" (2019, 224) that enable and constrain practices. Rules include norms of practices, social conventions and legal rules which are socially transmitted and tacitly or openly known by the members of the community involved. By acting upon individual and collective actors, institutions mould their thinking and acting in fundamental ways which at the same time ensures the institutions existence and re-production. Hence, agency and institutional structure are closely related, while institutions also sustain hierarchies through everyday practices and are naturalized over time (Ahmed 2007). We thus conceptualize competition as an institution that serves to sustain societal power relations.

However, not all rules of institutions are the same, as reflected in abundant literature on formal and informal rules (Hodgson 2006; Wright 1994; Berger and Luckmann 1990; Britan and Cohen 1980). The distinction between formal and informal is marked by the question of codifiability. While formal rules refer to such rules that are codified in legal frameworks, informal rules refer to those outside official recognition, commonly without strict adherence to legal frameworks. Yet, this distinction does not capture legitimising and negotiating aspects that are important to understand power relations. To understand how competition perpetuates social inequalities, the concept of hegemony is helpful. Hegemony refers to the dominance or leadership of one group, state, or ideology over others, often maintained through both consent and subtle cultural, political, or

economic influence rather than direct force. Gramsci (2012) famously developed the concept to show how ruling groups sustain their power by shaping social norms and ideas so that their values become accepted as "common sense" by subordinate groups. The "common sense" then defines what can be said and done legitimately with reference to a specific hegemonic constellation. Hence, hegemony demarcates the border between the illegitimate and the legitimate. This notion of common sense and its role in reproducing power relations ties in well with competition as an institution as proposed by Hearn (2021, 376). However, the concept of hegemony is rather broad and lacks precise distinctions between different types of rules. This hinders interdisciplinary discussion, so we suggest using a new distinction: explicit and implicit rules of competition. The following chapter develops this distinction.

3. Explicit and Implicit Rules: Cases of Competitive Formats

Competition reinforces social inequalities through more or less socially acknowledged mechanisms. Drawing from critical social theories and the concept of hegemony, we can delineate that overt and covert factors shape social interactions within competitive contexts (Jäger 2001; Bieler and Morton 2008). To better understand these dynamics, we propose distinguishing between explicit and implicit rules of competition. While this distinction appears frequently across critical social theories, it has not been used systematically. The terms offer a way to understand how competition operates on multiple levels. We contend that formalizing this terminology allows both a recognition of the context-specificity of different competitive formats (form and scope) as well as meaningful interdisciplinary conversations about how competition functions and what consequences it produces.

We distinct explicit and implicit rules along the concept of "the border of what can be said (and done)" (see Figure 1) in that it is acknowledged that some things can be said and done more easily, while others cannot (Jäger 2015). This suggests that competition as a principle of social, economic and political organization exhibits aspects that are easy to access, at the same time concealing some of its preconditions, rules and effects. Historical decisions shape the rules that govern participation, revealing the tacit forces that sustain competition beyond formal regulatory frameworks (Ahmed 2007). Explicitness thereby, denotes the generally accepted opinions, feelings, practices, strategies and so on. Hence, explicit rules are publicly articulated, socially accepted, and often institutionalized. They include (legal) regulations, development strategies, and narratives that frame competition as meritocratic, fair, or efficient. They are visible, discussable, and often serve to maintain the legitimacy of competition. However, they are inherently related to things that are beyond what can be said and done. Aspects that are concealed might challenge existing narratives, orders or systems in some way, but are certainly not socially accepted and are seen as implicit in our formulation. Implicit rules are hidden, backgrounded, or socially silenced. They include norms, affects, and structural arrangements that reproduce inequality but cannot be easily named or challenged. These rules are less accessible to critique because they fall outside of what is considered legitimate to question – the border of what can be said and done. This perspective helps to uncover the implicit force of everyday

practice, covered by tools such as explicit rules of competition that legitimise these logics under the guise of fair selection.

Thus, this framework allows to examine both the stated rules of competition and the unspoken assumptions that often determine outcomes and practices, providing a more complete picture of how competitive systems maintain or challenge existing power structures.

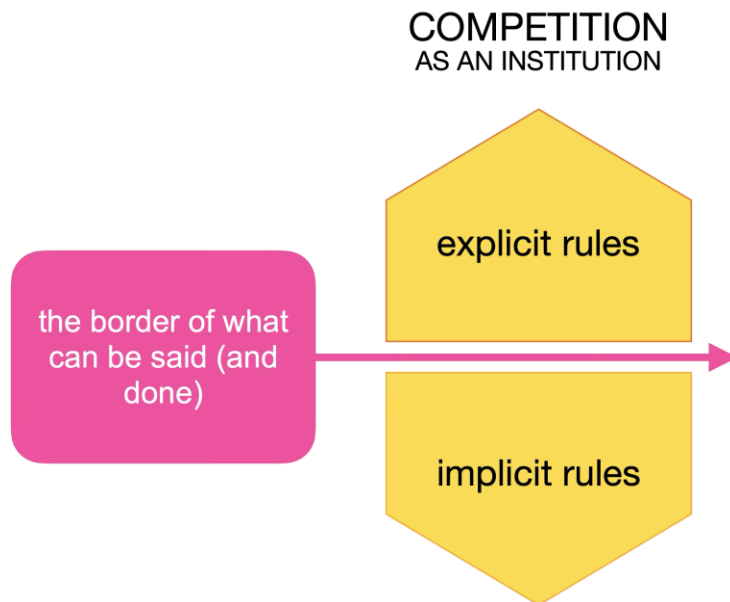


Figure 1: Competition as an institution constituted by rules. The rules of competition are differentiated by the border of what can be said (and done) into explicit and implicit rules.

In the following, we elaborate the meaning and interrelation of explicit and implicit rules in three distinct competitive formats: firstly, tenant selection on highly competitive housing markets marked by profound scarcity in affordable housing; secondly, the competition of ideas with regard to policymaking and strategy selection in the European Union in face of environmental and geopolitical challenges; and thirdly, outcomes of global competition depending on structural inequalities and historical path-dependencies of the Global North and South, respectively. In doing so, we can demonstrate the usefulness of the explicit-implicit-distinction when comparing rather distinct competitive formats. In the subsequent chapter we discuss the merits of such a common lens to the systemic understanding of competition.

Competition for Housing

The financialization and responsabilisation of housing (Heeg 2013) has exacerbated affordability and accessibility problems in cities around the world, especially in those considered attractive for investment (Aalbers 2016; Kazepov and Verwiebe 2021; Mendes 2022). This has led to a shortage of affordable housing, which should not be confused with natural scarcity. Many buildings remain empty because speculation is more profitable than renting, and the increased

mobility of a global elite allows landlords to raise rents. Many developers are building luxury or investment housing in a neoliberal regime of diminishing pensions and the rise of the self-reliant subject, so scarcity is not a lack of housing, but a lack of affordable housing built for residential use. Competition plays a crucial role in making landlords and real estate agents the gatekeepers of the housing market, a phenomenon driven by the scarcity of affordable housing.

In the private rental market, the scarcity of affordable housing is managed through competitive allocation, while in the social housing sector it is based on waiting lists and predefined criteria. The potential tenants must compete with their whole personality, and the landlord or real estate agent selects the most suitable tenant, based on their own criteria. As a result, housing seekers must adapt competitive practices to secure housing, while landlords and real estate agents, acting as gatekeepers, face situations where they must choose from multiple applicants.

Explicit and Implicit rules

The tenant selection does not rely on a single set of standards, instead it operates through intertwined layers of implicit and explicit rules. Explicit rules appear objective and measurable, and implicit rules are affective, unspoken, and culturally coded. While the explicit rules establish who is formally eligible, the implicit rules often decide who is ultimately chosen. Understanding this implicit-explicit intertwinement reveals how discrimination can persist even when no one explicitly articulates exclusionary criteria.

On the surface, the criteria for renting an apartment seem straightforward. Applicants must be able to pay the rent and care for the property. These conditions are backed up by documents such as proof of income, employment contracts, or guarantors (Bürgschaft, KSVa). These requirements are codified, legible, and, at least partly, measurable. Yet even within explicit rules, ambiguities arise. The expectation that someone will “take care of the apartment,” for example, cannot be verified as easily as income. But it is also difficult to predict whether someone is going to lose their job. Explicit rules leave room for interpretation, creating openings where judgments intervene. Explicit rules set the threshold of eligibility but rarely determine the final choice. Furthermore, they rely much on judgement which opens up the space for implicit rules.

Implicit rules operate through gut feelings, impressions of trustworthiness, or the sense that an applicant has the “right energy.” Gatekeepers often describe these qualities as neutral or commonsensical, as just a “gut feeling,” but also the body and affects are structured by shared cultural norms (Ahmed 2014; Åhäll 2018). What feels safe, clean, or respectable is tied to dominant codes of whiteness, middle-class and bourgeois respectability, heteronormativity, and gendered expectations (Ahmed 2014). From the applicants’ perspective, implicit rules are often sensed rather than spelled out. They feel discrimination in how their bodies are reacted to (Ahmed 2007), the kinds of questions they are asked, or the unspoken comparisons with other candidates. Because the criteria are opaque, applicants must interpret subtle signals, and many learn that their ability to pay is not enough: they must also embody the right “aura.”

The interplay between explicit and implicit rules structures the entire process. Among those who are pre-selected, implicit rules become decisive. An applicant who provides proof of income may still be rejected if their manner of speaking, appearance, or hobbies fail to inspire confidence. In this way, financial criteria establish a baseline, but cultural codes determine who succeeds within the eligible pool.

Housing scarcity intensifies this dynamic. When there are dozens of applicants competing for the same apartment, landlords and estate agents can afford to be more selective. Not only must tenants demonstrate financial stability, but they must also present themselves in ways that align with dominant expectations. Competition transforms tenant selection into a sophisticated evaluative process: beyond the ability to pay, applicants are judged on demeanour, lifestyle, and perceived respectability.

This explicit-implicit intertwinement has profound consequences. Explicit rules appear fair, since they are formally the same for everyone. Implicit rules appear neutral or subjective, since they are framed as mere gut feelings, common sense or personal preference. Yet together they reproduce social inequality. Those who embody hegemonic norms through language, clothing, lifestyle, or family form are favoured, while others are quietly excluded. Because implicit rules cannot be legally challenged in the same way as explicit discrimination, they remain a hidden but powerful mechanism of exclusion. Tenant selection thus becomes not simply about financial eligibility but about cultural fit. The process naturalizes inequality under the guise of neutrality, transforming private prejudices into institutionalized practices. What landlords and agents call gut feeling or good judgment is in fact the reproduction of social hierarchies in everyday housing markets.

Competition of Ideas in Industrial Policy(making)

Policymaking always involves a decision for one policy outcome out of a pool of possible policy outcomes. As such, the policymaking process can seem messy and contradictory at first sight. This is also the case for current industrial policy at the EU-level. Conceiving it as competition of ideas mediated by institutional path dependencies and power relations within the EU political economy is thus fruitful. The political science debate on the competition of ideas centres on how differing beliefs, values, and narratives affect policy outcomes and public opinion, with scholars increasingly recognizing that "ideas matter" as much as material interests or institutions (Swinkels 2020; Berman 2013). In the context of EU industrial policy, this competition happens in a context of new (global) power relations, the climate crisis and accordingly, shifting political ideas on how to sustain the EU's development model: Since the rise of neoliberalism, industrial policies were deemed inefficient and harmful (Aiginger and Rodrik 2020; Bulfone 2022). EU industrial policy reflected this by ensuring fair competition and market openness, designed for a world where the EU led in advanced manufacturing and all players followed WTO liberalization rules (Porak 2023b). However, two dynamics now challenge this neoliberal consensus: the climate crisis demanding green transition and intensified competition from emerging economies, particularly China (Babić et al. 2022). China's state-led development model has leapfrogged up global value chains through interventionist industrial policies, directly threatening core EU industries like automotive and railway, while also outpacing EU net-zero industries through more direct steering of green technological innovation (Fang et al. 2025). These pressures have prompted far-reaching EU policy changes to reconcile green transition with maintaining strong world market position, resulting in what scholars describe as "retooling" (Di Carlo and Schmitz 2023) or "contradictory" policy shaped by "clashing sets of ideas" (Abels 2024; Porak 2025).

Explicit and Implicit rules

With altered world market competition, leeway within political institutions emerges for considering new sets of ideas that are suitable to make sense of the world (market), address new problems and challenges for EU industry and inform the design of EU industrial policy. The long dominant neoliberalism is one of them, the green transition according to ecological modernization another (Bulfone 2022; Porak 2023a; 2025). Likewise, the new geo-economic orientation is reflected in the increasing relevance of autonomy and dependence as well as security questions in economic policy, also at the expense of free markets (Porak 2025; Abels 2024). Each set of ideas might be used as guiding principles to inform EU industrial policy and thus, define what can be dreamt of and done in this policy realm. Within this competition, the struggle between competing sets of ideas within policymaking institutions and legal procedures appears as explicit rules. Different EU political actors, such as members of the commission, MEP, but also organized interest groups and other stakeholders, put forward political strategies and policies shaped by specific sets of ideas (e.g., neoliberalism or geo-economics) that are able to target new problems or challenges, but likewise (at least appear to) fulfil their specific interests. Eventually, a compromise will be reached that is acceptable for the majority of the involved actors and follows the highly formalized procedures of EU legislative processes. In sum, explicit aspects of the policymaking process are relatively easily accessible and thus, open to debate and contestation: Information about explicit rules is accessible on public channels, such as the website of the European Parliament and often picked up in public and media discourses.

However, there is also a second layer to policymaking processes, which usually remains concealed and hence, is hardly debated in and beyond policymaking processes. What is part of this layer is defined by the concrete existing power relations which define what is think-, say- and do-able. It, among other things, involves the definition of problems, access to policymaking, non-public (=background) information on political matters, geopolitical interests held from the public, economic interests and clientele politics, and last but not least, the (more or less conscious) ideological orientation of policies, policymakers and stakeholders, which always pre-defines which problems are seen and how they can be solved. More precisely, competition between different sets of ideas is mediated by implicit rules, reflected in institutional path dependencies and power relations. First, *institutional path dependencies* limit the manifold options that political strategies and policies might take since any policies implemented need to connect to existing institutions or policies and the established approaches of policymakers in said field. This way, a self-reinforcing mechanism is set in place, where sets of ideas are more likely to be chosen if they align with existing institutions. For instance, competition policy at the EU level has been shaped by ordoliberalism since its early origins in the 1950s. Although, recently an increasing geo-economic orientation enters competition policy, for instance reflected in new merger and state aid regulations, a turn away from ordoliberalism surely was not yet fully accomplished (Gräf 2024; Porak 2025). Rather, ordoliberal claims of fair competition - but with reference to the world market - are used in order to legitimize the reforms (Porak 2025). Second, *power relations* affect which sets of ideas or narratives are seen as acceptable - and which are simply excluded from political debate at all. Within the EU policymaking process, power relations particularly are reflected in access to policymaking and resources (i.e., capital) of organized interest groups (Porak 2023a). Regarding access to policymaking, not all actors are granted equal access to policymaking institutions, which leads to highly asymmetrical policy advisory institutions. This is for instance reflected in the EU industrial forum (Porak 2023b). Likewise, capital and other resources are

central to influence the policymaking process for their own sake. Yet, NGOs and other social or ecological actors tend to have limited financial resources, while industrial stakeholders have more capital and are thus able to spend more resources on lobbying. This points towards a major disequilibrium in policymaking processes at the EU level that is clearly reflected in policy outcomes: Growth, competitiveness and their alignment with the green transition appear as unquestionable truths, while social concerns (such as affordability of the green transition) is sidelined (ib.).

In sum, the interplay between explicit and implicit rules structures the entire policymaking process: Implicit rules define what is think-, do- and say-able and this way set the parameters for any political decisions, while explicit rules in the end, define what really is decided within the policy process. So, although not apparent at first sight, eventually institutional path dependencies and power relations determine which compromise can be agreed on. Change of explicit rules can proceed far easier and faster, since deconstructing implicit rules always scrapes on the border of what can be said.

Competition between Global North and South

At the global level, competition is negotiated as part of the development discourse and the question of why some countries are rich and others are poor (Rodrik 2011; Stiglitz 2002; Pareira 2010; Wallerstein 2009). Central to this discourse are trade and trade relationships, where competition is the core rationale and mechanism through which a global world order is legitimized¹. Through international trade and trade agreements all countries theoretically participate in the global market on equal terms, offering their goods for exchange and competing for market share. The prevailing belief in international development suggests that a nation's economic success and thus its competitiveness is largely determined by its internal, domestic factors. Wealthy nations have prospered due to effective governance, robust institutions, and open markets. Conversely, poorer nations have struggled to develop because they lack these attributes or are hindered by corruption, bureaucratic obstacles, and inefficiency (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Sachs 2005; Collier 2007; Rostow 1960; Moyo 2009; Calderisi 2006). As a result, development efforts should primarily aim to improve domestic policies in countries of the Global South, supported by aid from donor nations (Hickel et al. 2021). The underlying understanding is that states are isolated entities and that internal structures are decisive. Only when considered in isolation can competition be fair. In line with this, efforts in mainstream development economics concentrate instead on reducing global poverty, basic needs and constraints at the individual or firm level.

Competition and free trade were and are primarily promoted by countries and regions in the Global North and associated actors such as the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF (Krugman 1994; Stiglitz 2002). The countries of the Global South have been observed to acquiesce to structural reforms as part of world market integration and with the allegedly associated promise of growth and development. Such integration was not always the first choice of countries in the Global South

¹ At least this has been the case in the last decades of peace between countries in the Global North. In this era, strength was mainly associated with economic potency. In recent years we experience a change in these dynamics where the geopolitical order seems to be again determined by strength as the ability to fare economic war backed by military force (Lavery and Schmid, 2021).

or at least not under the conditions imposed by free trade. The literature on unequal exchange highlights that it is countries in the Global North that are hugely profiting from this arrangement (Hickel et al. 2022). Of course, global competition and free trade as means for development are contested, but contestation that focuses on power structures is marginalised (Aistleitner and Puehringer 2023).

Explicit and Implicit rules

In the case of global competition structures and institutions such as free trade, exemplified by no tariffs, quotas or any form of protection of domestic industries are explicit rules; as is the "fixing" of internal structures (fight corruption, set the "right" incentives, etc.); they are negotiated and promoted by politics and dominant economic theory alike (Aistleitner and Puehringer 2021). These rules are used to justify competitive outcomes: Countries that win these competitions and have large market shares or are able to accumulate value-added from trade do so rightly because they have allegedly implemented successful and competitive structures. On the other hand, the failure of countries to accumulate wealth through global competition can be attributed to their failure to put in place the "right" institutions or to develop the "right" incentive structure. When countries struggle economically, their situation is lamented, but the structures between countries producing these outcomes remain unquestioned. As such they are not recognized on an official level as the responsibility of richer states; they cannot be discussed in public.

What remains implicit is the fact that changing the underlying global structures is not something countries alone can achieve: The relationship between successful and not so successful countries is one of dependency, where dependency is "a situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another" (Dos Santos 1970, 231). This asymmetric relationship can be characterised along the lines of centrality and peripherality. Peripherality here is understood not simply as countries being "late to the game" (Kvangraven 2021, 78), but rather as being structurally disadvantaged.

Implicitness is best described by this very "conditioning" mentioned in the quote of Dos Santos, related to financial constraints, consumption patterns, technological dependence, ownership of production, price-level discrepancies etc. All these factors, as well as the path-dependent nature of development, are not considered in global competition, but they do affect a country's competitiveness. The format of competition here acts as a legitimizing shield, a way in which historically grown power structures are not up for contestation. In terms of unequal exchange, Emmanuel and Amin identify the 'hidden transfer of value'. This transfer is subtle and almost invisible, without the overt coercion of the colonial apparatus, and therefore does not provoke moral outrage (Hickel et al. 2022). This non-provocation of moral outrage is due to the implicit aspects of competition that enable this transfer.

At the same time, the need to be allowed to compete in global markets and thus to have any chance of development through world market integration (removal of tariffs, subsidies or other protection for infant industries) essentially weakens the competitiveness of countries in the Global South (Chang 2008). This creates a fundamental paradox: Global South countries must adopt the very policies that systematically disadvantage them in order to participate in the global economy at all. Thus, although competition explicitly demands these measures, they are implicitly disadvantageous, trapping developing countries in a cycle where market access requires accepting structural weakness. This illustrates the complex intertwinement of explicit and implicit

factors, which renders competition a inequality-reinforcing mechanism in global capitalism, enabling dominant countries to maintain their privileged position while presenting the system as meritocratic and fair.

4. Interdisciplinary Framework to Analyse Competition

The examples illustrate that rules are never produced in a power-free space. Distinguishing explicit and implicit rules allows to uncover the way competition legitimizes itself, by claiming to create equal opportunities for all. More precisely, in examining what is visible, sayable, and legitimate in competitive settings, and understanding it as explicit rules that interact with implicit rules, we are able to unravel how power relations and structures are reproduced although the competitive formats are rather distinct. As the example of the European Union shows, the restriction of access to competition of ideas pre-determines policy outcomes. In global economic competition, the competitive logic is used to legitimize outcomes. In the competitive housing allocation, discrimination is naturalized through reference to gut feeling or intuition (see Table 1 for a synthesis). Thus, the workings of competition as well as its consequences and effects are context-specific and vary in scope. Therefore, also explicit and implicit rules are not static. What is explicit in one context or in a time period may become implicit in another, and vice versa. For instance, women faced difficulties in the last century and were explicitly prohibited from finding housing. Now, however, they might be preferred due to tidiness stereotypes. What can be said changes from society to society and over the years but might also be different among sub-groups of the same society. For example, there are sub-groups in countries of the Global North that criticise structural dependencies and name them outright. This does not mean, however, that this is a general consensus. Thus, any analysis of implicit and explicit rules must be attentive to its social, cultural, and political embedding and their relationship to each other might also change in various competitive formats. However, what is meant by explicit and implicit rules stays the same.

Competitive Format	Explicit Rules	Implicit Rules	Legitimation Mechanism/Strategy
competition for housing	pay rent, care for the apartment	whiteness, middle-class and bourgeois respectability, heteronormativity, and gendered expectations	discriminatory behaviour is naturalized based on "gut feelings"

competition of ideas in policymaking	legal frameworks and policymaking procedures	access to policymaking institutions and power relations in the wider political economy	policy proposals presented as strategic or “best” decisions not as furthering particular interests
competition between Global North and Global South	liberal market rules (e.g., openness, no industry protection) and “right” incentive structure	historical dependency, structural subordination, global hierarchies masked by “neutral” economic discourse	long-running dependencies and associated asymmetric relations presented as individual failure

Table 1: Synthesis of the competitive formats, the explicit and implicit rules therein and the legitimization mechanism or strategy.

Each competitive format has been analysed with a research tradition in mind. Conceptualising competition as proposed in this paper has allowed us to look past the differences and focus on the commonalities. What we can learn is that explicit rules always leave room for interpretation or gaps, and it is precisely here that implicit rules come into play. While explicit rules regulate formal eligibility, implicit rules determine who is actually chosen and what is actually decided, so it does not only shape the outcome but also how explicit rules are formulated, defining what can become a rule in the first place. As such the explicit rules of competition serve to legitimize uneven competitive outcomes that are shaped by implicit rules. Figure 2 captures the application of our framework to our competitive formats and delineates how competition feeds into the reproduction of inequalities.

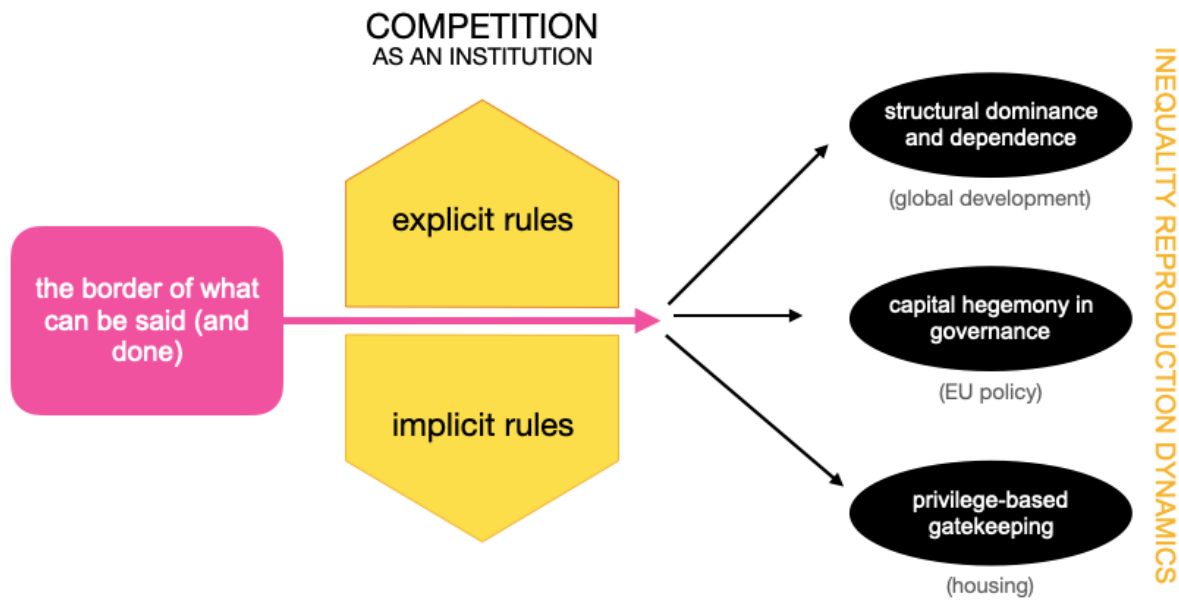


Figure 2: Our framework of explicit and implicit rules and the distinct mechanism in each format through which inequalities are reproduced.

Our framework has also allowed us to identify aspects that were not addressed in the other respective analyses and thus enabled interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation. As in the case of the concept of embodiment of rules: Power operates not only through institutions or discourses but also through embodied experiences and emotions, revealing how social arrangements are affectively charged. Certain things feel “right” or “wrong,” yet not all these feelings can be openly expressed. Bodies and feelings are always socially shaped. While this is obvious in the case of competition for housing, it is interesting to note that it also plays a role in the rule relationship in the other two formats. In all formats explicit rules are made by actors whose decisions are shaped by affective responses. In the discussion of the competition of ideas as well as in global competition, it would not be considered legitimate to invoke “gut feeling,” yet these affective dynamics remain present and influential. Considering that powerful actors often simply follow their sentiments, or that affects regulate what can be said and done, can be highly informative when researching all areas of policymaking involving actors. It is precisely these types of insights that highlight the potential of interdisciplinary research to illuminate complex dynamics that might otherwise remain obscured.

Following Sayer’s (2009) notion of critique as the “reduction of illusion,” this framework allows us to challenge the notion that competition is neutral or universally beneficial. Moreover, naming the underlying structures also enables their transformation: implicit, concealed rules can pop up on the surface and cause irritation or disruptions. Particularly for this reason, in reality such moments are enclosed and re-aligned with dominating (=hegemonial) narratives and the underlying social structure as fast as possible.

All our examples discussed before refer to this moment of subversion and enclosure in a way: For tenants, the feeling of being discriminated against, can be mobilizing. In a context where the criteria for being successful in a competition are so vague, affect is often the only source through which discrimination can be grasped. When these feelings are taken seriously or given space to, it can also become a form of resistance. The EU re-assesses its world market position against the background of the most recent changes in global power dynamics, while also considering organized interest groups and national interests. Along these lines, struggles take place that eventually feed into a new socio-economic strategy adapted to altered global competition. In the case of world market competition, the proposed tariffs and quotes by the Trump administration showcase what implicitly makes for a competitive advantage. While there is a certain degree of outrage from other countries in the Global North, they are quick to adapt their competitive strategies and do the same. The forced absence of exactly these protection measures in the Global South have led to a decreased capacity to compete with the Global North emphasising the ambiguity of competition.

Moments of disruption occur when implicit rules surface – when affects become articulated, when hegemonic narratives falter, or when structural dependencies are exposed. These moments offer opportunities for structural transformation. However, such moments are often rapidly reabsorbed into dominant logics and re-stabilized by powerful actors. Our examples collectively show that while competition is often justified through explicit narratives of fairness and opportunity, its actual effects are shaped by implicit structures of inequality. Therefore, a critical framework that distinguishes between implicit and explicit rules, grounded in power analysis, is essential for both empirical understanding and normative evaluation.

5. Conclusion

In this article we delineate a theoretical framework accounting for implicit and explicit rules of competition by analysing three empirical cases of competitive formats. While often understood as a neutral technical mechanism, we conceptualise competition as an institution shaped by specific more or less easily accessible rules making it an instrument to reproduce power relations under the guise of fair selection. For doing so, we argue that competitive outcomes must be understood as constituted by both explicit and implicit aspects. The distinction between explicit and implicit rules is defined by the “border of what can be said (and done)” (Jäger 2015). Implicit rules are all such aspects that cannot be said or done easily and are mostly concealed, while explicit rules are overt to all actors; while explicit rules govern formal processes, implicit rules determine actual participation and outcomes, thereby shaping not only decisions but also the formulation of explicit rules themselves. Together, explicit and implicit rules legitimise unequal competitive outcomes and reinforce social structures and power relations. In this manner, the instrumentalization of competition in neoliberalism is addressed – as highlighted by Altreiter et al. (2025, 18) – where the implicit rules demonstrate that the concept of competition is not an impartial instrument for evaluation, thereby contradicting the prevailing notion of its neutrality. By rendering implicit rules visible and contestable, opportunities are created for a more democratic, just and reflective organisation of competition in society.

Our framework captures both the empirical variability and the normative ambiguity of competition. Understanding the latter as an institution with explicit and implicit rules helps to bridge different theoretical approaches while preserving their distinct emphases. This allows for the context-specificity of competition to be taken into account, while also recognising its universal operation closely intertwined with power relations. In doing so, our article illustrates how the distinction between implicit and explicit rules of competition emerges as a valuable tool for interdisciplinary analysis. Interdisciplinary research on competition is necessary because it is a pervasive phenomenon in modern societies. It manifests itself at different scales and its functioning and outcomes are context-specific. The applicability of the framework to differing competitive formats highlights the usefulness of the proposed research framework. It allows us to view competition as a form of social organisation deeply intertwined with power relations and responsible for their reproduction.

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