

Editorial

Decolonizing Rather than Decentring ‘Europe’

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Josep Borrell’s infamous 13 October 2022 speech, where he described the European Union (EU) in terms of a ‘garden’ versus the ‘jungle’ outside, has received an unprecedented amount of scrutiny. Yet the metaphor used by the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and European Commission Vice-President in charge of ‘a stronger Europe in the world’ was not new, nor was its underlying logic a surprise. Various analysts have pointed out the colonial tropes in European policy-makers’ discourses over the past decades. In an influential essay that came out in 2000, Sir Robert Cooper, who would later also become an advisor to the Council of the EU, the European External Action Service, and the European Commission, pitched the ‘postmodern’ EU where the rule of law is reigning versus ‘premodern’ states where the ‘law of the jungle’ prevails.¹ This illustrates how mainstream EU political discourse has been, and remains, highly colonial in the way in which relations between the EU and its presumed ‘others’ in world politics are conceived.

More notable is the intensity of the debate and condemnation that Borrell’s speech has generated within policy and scholarly circles. This reflects a growing realization that the EU should be more modest about its so-called civilizational achievements and acknowledge the long and dark shadow of its colonial past. Against the background of clear challenges to (western) European dominance in the world system, critical observers are ardently questioning Europe’s alleged moral and sociopolitical superiority. Issues of racism *within* Europe have been increasingly discussed in the wake of ‘Black Lives Matter’ protests. Recent research has revealed

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¹ R. Cooper, *The Post-Modern State and the World Order* (Demos 2000).

the colonial logics behind the creation of the European Economic Community.² Equally important, the idea of ‘coloniality’ forces us to think through the persistence of civilizational, economic, epistemic, gendered and racialized hierarchies today despite the nominal act of decolonization.³

These developments have not gone unnoticed in academia. Research agendas have emerged around ‘decentring’, ‘disrupting’ and ‘decolonizing’ the discipline of EU (foreign policy) studies. For instance, papers, panels and roundtables on these issues received prominent places in recent conferences of the European Union Studies Association (Miami, May 2022) and the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (Lille, September 2022). New handbooks in the discipline also include chapters on decentring as well as decolonial and postcolonial perspectives.⁴ Gurminder K. Bhambra, a well-recognized professor, working in the field of postcolonial and decolonial studies, wrote the Annual Lecture Article for the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, a leading journal in EU studies.⁵ In it, Bhambra articulates a ‘decolonial project for Europe’ that necessarily begins with acknowledging the material structures inherited from colonialism that are still present today and insists on the imperative of postcolonial reparations. In 2023, the *Journal of Contemporary European Research* will publish an entire special issue on disrupting European Studies,⁶ with contributions dedicated to, among others, decolonizing EU trade relations with the Global Souths and decolonial approaches to curricular thought and praxis in European Studies.

It can only be applauded that such questions are gradually finding a place in mainstream discussions on European foreign policy. That said, considerable

² For example, P. Hansen & S. Jonsson, *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism* (Bloomsbury Publishing 2014); P. Pasture, *The EC/EU Between the Art of Forgetting and the Palimpsest of Empire*, 26(3) *Eur. Rev.* 545–581 (2018); A. Van Weyenberg, ‘Europe’ on Display: A Postcolonial Reading of the House of European History, 66(4) *Politique Européenne* 44–71 (2019); G. Garavini, *After Empires* (Oxford University Press 2021); M. Brown, *The Seventh Member State. Algeria, France, and the European Community* (Harvard University Press 2022).

³ Compare A. Quijano, *Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America*, 15(2) *Int’l Soc.* 215–232 (2000); M. Lugones, *Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System*, 22(1) *Hypatia* 186–219 (2007); G. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa: Myths of Decolonization*, Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (2013).

⁴ For example, C. Kinnvall, *Postcolonialism*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical European Studies* 72–84 (Routledge 2020); N. Fisher-Onar & K. Nicolaïdis, *The Decentring Agenda: A Post-Colonial Approach to EU External Action*, in *The External Action of the European Union: Concepts, Approaches, Theories* 288–304 (Red Globe Press 2021); S. Keukeleire & S. Lecocq, *Decentring European Foreign Policy Analysis*, in *The External Action of the European Union: Concepts, Approaches, Theories* 297–312 (Red Globe Press 2021); T. Hastrup, *Critical Perspectives on Africa’s Relationship With the European Union*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical European Studies* 511–522 (Routledge 2020); R. W. Sebhatu, *Applying Postcolonial Approaches to Studies on Africa-EU Relations*, in *The Routledge Handbook on EU-Africa Relations* (Routledge 2021).

⁵ G. K. Bhambra, *A Decolonial Project for Europe*, 60(2) *J. Com. Mkt. Stud.* 229–244 (2022); see also T. Hastrup, R. Milner & R. G. Whitman, *Who Creates the ‘Common Market’? The Gendered Practices of Knowledge Production in a ‘European Studies’ Journal*, 21 *Eur. Pol. Sci.* 417–429 (2022).

⁶ M. David, M. Garcia, T. Hastrup & F. Mattheis, *Disrupting European Studies?*, *J. Contemp. Eur. Res.* (forthcoming).

challenges remain in teasing out the (meta)theoretical, methodological and empirical implications of ‘decentring’ and ‘postcolonial’ or ‘decolonial’ approaches to EU foreign policy. In the field of EU external action, the decentring agenda has been conceptualized by Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis⁷ in terms of three analytical dimensions: provincialization (questioning Eurocentrism), engagement (exploring ‘non-European’ perspectives), and reconstruction (recalibrating EU policies). Building on this, Keukeleire and Lecocq have further operationalized these three stages into a research agenda that considers categories of space, time, polity and norms.⁸

In this sense, the decentring agenda pluralizes modes of knowing EU/Europe within a field grappling with Eurocentrism. However, there is much ambiguity on how this increasingly popular scholarly enterprise relates to postcolonial perspectives or, more alarmingly, how it subsumes the decolonial option. Although the decentring project (rightly) claims to be ‘inspired’ by postcolonial theories and indeed borrows from thinkers and concepts within the diverse strand of postcolonial thought, it does not have the same political commitments as the decolonial project. If anything, it provides the EU with convenient epistemological leeway to use the coloniality of power to thrive and serve its interests. The ambiguity with which the decentring agenda navigates postcolonial work, in some cases conflating the two strands of literature, can be interpreted as a way to recentre Europe in a veiled way. Arguably, the decentring agenda may appropriate and weaponize certain elements of postcolonial work against the decolonial project.

Decentring scholarship mostly aims to build bridges between academia and policy practitioners by presenting legitimate (including post/decolonial) concerns through less provocative vocabularies. From this perspective, decentring could contribute to a more ‘self-reflective’, ‘adapted’ or ‘recalibrated’ European foreign policy that is more suited to the increasingly complex and fast-changing world, which could be realized through training EU civil servants and diplomats in the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS).⁹ Decentring scholarship is more concerned about the possibilities of changes within existing structures through pragmatic policy measures and discussions with those already in positions of power; decolonial thought would have a more antagonistic approach towards existing institutions and rather orient the conversation towards and engage with wider social justice movements and aim for a longer-term paradigm change. Instead of the changes that come with an ‘increasingly connected, contested and

⁷ N. Fisher-Onar & K. Nicolaïdis, *The Decentring Agenda: Europe as a Post-Colonial Power*, 48(2) *Coop. Confl.* 283–303 (2013); Fisher-Onar & Nicolaïdis, *supra* n. 4.

⁸ S. Lecocq & S. Keukeleire, *Decentring the Analysis of EU Foreign Policy and External-Internal Legitimacy: (Re-)introducing Polity*, 4(2–3) *Global Aff.* 341–351 (2016); Keukeleire & Lecocq, *supra* n. 4; S. Keukeleire & S. Lecocq, *Operationalising the Decentring Agenda: Analysing European Foreign Policy in a Non-European and Post-Western World*, 53(2) *Coop. Confl.* 277–295 (2018).

⁹ Compare Keukeleire & Lecocq, *supra* n. 4, at 307, 317.

complex world'¹⁰ or 'an increasingly non-European and post western order',¹¹ decolonial thought stresses colonial *continuities* over the past centuries and the *persistence* of coloniality of power in our societies.

Thus, there exist not only significant differences but, in fact, contradictions between such approaches. By defining the distinctions between decentring and decolonial approaches in a more discernible way (*see* table below), we aim to provoke much-needed dialogues on (the study of) the EU in the world. With this purpose in mind, we admittedly synthesize the vast diversity of the decentring and decolonial perspectives with a view to juxtaposing their differences. Our insights on the decentring agenda rely mainly on a number of key publications¹² and on public discussions with its key proponents.¹³

*Table Decentring and Decolonial Agendas in EU Foreign Policy Studies?
Stylized Comparison*

		<i>Decentring</i>	<i>Decolonizing</i>
General	Key works	Fisher-Onar & Nicolaïdis ¹⁴ ; Keukeleire & Lecocq ¹⁵	Sebhatu ¹⁶ ; Bhambra ¹⁷ ; Rutazibwa ¹⁸ ; Staeger ¹⁹ ; Alcazar III et al ²⁰ ; Evans & Ionescu ²¹
	Origins	– (Mainstream) political science, EU studies and International Relations (IR) – Universities	– Critical social theory and sociological approaches – Geopolitically situated struggles
Approach	General	Research agenda	Political agenda
	Posture	– Constructive – Connecting with policy- makers	– Disruptive and dismantling – Social justice movements

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, at 307.

¹¹ Fisher-Onar & Nicolaïdis, *supra* n. 4, at 297.

¹² Fisher-Onar & Nicolaïdis, *supra* n. 7 and *supra* n. 4; Keukeleire & Lecocq, *supra* n. 4 & *supra* n. 8.

¹³ UACES Roundtable (Lille 5 Sep. 2022); RELATE Seminar #3, online (26 Oct. 2022).

¹⁴ *Supra* n. 8, *supra* n. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Supra* n. 4.

¹⁷ *Supra* n. 5.

¹⁸ O. Rutazibwa, *What If We Took Autonomous Recovery Seriously? A Democratic Critique of Contemporary Western Ethical Foreign Policy*, 20(1) *Ethical Persps.* 81–108 (2013).

¹⁹ U. Staeger, *Africa-EU Relations and Normative Power Europe: A Decolonial Pan-African Critique*, 54(4) *J. Com. Mkt. Stud.* 981–998 (2016).

²⁰ A. S. M. Alcazar III, C. Nessel & J. Orbie, *Disruption as Dialogue: Decolonising EU Trade Relations With the Global Souths?*, *J. Contemp. Eur. Res.* (forthcoming).

²¹ A. M. F. Evans & D. P. Ionescu, *Unlearning and Relearning Europe: Theoretical and Practical Approaches to Decolonizing European Studies Curricula*, *J. Contemp. Eur. Res.* (forthcoming).

	<i>Decentring</i>	<i>Decolonizing</i>
	Process	– Ticking the box – Framework – Heuristic device
Goals	Main goal	– Boxing – Work – Critique
	For whom	– Decolonize – Justice and emancipation
	Material	EU (researchers; practitioners)
	Epistemic	Subaltern, Postcolonial subjects/ subjecthood, Colonized and racialized Others, Indigenous communities
		– Improve power – Adapt and recalibrate policies
		– Reshuffle power – System change, destroy colo- nial/modern hierarchies, return of Indigenous land and life
		– Know more – Knowledge can be neutral
		– Unknow, re-know, unlearn to relearn – Knowledge is always embo- died and political

Firstly, the distinction becomes most visible in the general posture of the presented writings. The decentring agenda reads like a constructive undertaking, which aims to ultimately contribute to a more diverse and inclusive world.²² This becomes especially clear in the third step of ‘reconstruction’. Interestingly, such bridge-building attempts do not necessarily imply a negation of EU interests. Quite the contrary, it is suggested that decentring of knowledge can, by being more aware of other perspectives, contribute to the *effectiveness* and even to the *legitimacy* of EU foreign policy.²³ Eurocentrism is problematic not only because of moral reasons but because it is ‘self-defeating’,²⁴ ‘counterproductive’ and ‘ineffective’ for EU foreign policy. In turn, these can be illustrated by referring to the EU’s failure to anticipate the Russian war against Ukraine²⁵ and many abstentions within the UN on this issue which diminish the EU’s power.²⁶ Decentring here appears as the

²² For example, Fisher-Onar & Nicolaïdis, *supra* n. 4, at 294; Fisher-Onar & Nicolaïdis, *supra* n. 7, at 29; S. Wolff, D. Gazsi, D. Huber & N. Fisher-Onar, *How to Reflexively Decentre EU Foreign Policy: Dissonance and Contrapuntal Reconstruction in Migration, Religious and Neighbourhood Governance*, 60(6) J. Com. Mkt. Stud. 1620 (2022).

²³ Keukeleire & Lecocq, *supra* n. 4, at 317. The authors also point out that decentring can ‘contribute to the EU’s efforts at resilience building’.

²⁴ Fisher-Onar & Nicolaïdis, *supra* n. 4, at 293.

²⁵ Keukeleire & Lecocq, *supra* n. 4, at 306, 316.

²⁶ Fisher-Onar, *supra* n. 13.

academic variant of spying in diplomacy. The logic is the same: by better understanding its presumed others, the EU is better equipped to pursue its (geo)political agendas in world politics. Ironically, the preoccupation with the EU's knowledge of the Other also serves to recentre Europe in the writings. Rather than meaningfully decolonizing the role of the EU in the world from geopolitically situated struggles and forms of resistance, in some ways it in fact reinforces it and enables its continuation.

Instead, the decolonizing agenda is critical of projects of inclusion into the existing dominant order.²⁷ It is explicitly and purposely disruptive, even to the point of inviting the uncomfortable feelings that may arise when the status quo is challenged. As fiercely and regretfully pronounced in Fanon's call for violence and de-linking from the (former) colonial oppressor,²⁸ decolonial authors have often pursued fundamental changes to the existing system. These changes should not only be of an epistemic nature – material dimensions should be stressed too. Importantly, the decentring agenda pays much attention to the knowledge dimension and the need to acknowledge different voices. However, it is less outspoken in terms of material redistributions of power,²⁹ let alone redress for colonial injuries and transgenerational injustices. Decolonial thought and praxis have more unflinchingly advanced the abolishment of existing institutions that inhibit the coloniality of power. The latter could involve, for instance, calls for the abolition of Economic Partnership Agreements with the EU,³⁰ reparations for formerly colonized peoples,³¹ or 'autonomous recovery' and de-linking from the Western (aid) system.³² In contrast, decentring authors emphasize the need for enhanced partnership, better conversations and engagement, with the EU still holding the upper-hand.

Secondly, and closely related, we notice the widely varying perspectives on the role of science. The decentring agenda presents itself as a research programme

²⁷ L. Luciani, *Decentring EU Human Rights Promotion. Three Civil Society Struggles and the Geo-politics of the EU's Interventions in the South Caucasus* 158 (2022), https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Laura-Luciani/publication/365508302_Decentring_EU_human_rights_promotion_Three_civil_society_struggles_and_the_geo-politics_of_the_EU's_interventions_in_the_South_Caucasus/links/6377b1d237878b3e87bfc7f0/Decentring-EU-human-rights-promotion-Three-civil-society-struggles-and-the-geo-politics-of-the-EU's-interventions-in-the-South-Caucasus.pdf (accessed 25 Nov. 22).

²⁸ F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove Press 1961).

²⁹ Fisher-Onar & Nicolaïdis (*supra* n. 7, at 294) do emphasize the need for a 'systematic mitigation of wealth and power asymmetries in international politics', but they do this in the context of the 'imperative of mutuality' which characterizes EU integration and should be 'translated from a norm prevailing inside the Union to a basic norm governing relations with the rest of the world'.

³⁰ Compare Sebhatu, *supra* n. 4; M. Langan & S. Price, *Migration, Development and EU Free Trade Deals: The Paradox of Economic Partnership Agreements as a Push Factor for Migration*, 7(4) *Global Aff.* 505–521 (2021).

³¹ Compare Bhambra, *supra* n. 5.

³² Compare Rutazibwa, *supra* n. 18.

that can at least to some extent (specifically, in the first and second phases) be ‘neutral’. As stated by Keukeleire and Lecocq:

a clear distinction should be made between the Decentring Agenda as an analytical or heuristic tool on the one hand, and as a normative judgment on the other. The aim is to assist scholars in detecting, labeling and understanding concepts, ideas and practices that do not fit within the usual frames of reference, without making *a priori* normative judgements.³³

Much effort has gone into developing and operationalizing ‘frameworks’ that serve as ‘heuristic devices’ and ‘tools’ for academics who want to decentre their research from Eurocentrism. A key part of the purported problem is indeed the ‘inadequacy ... to understand and explain the EU’s role and the outcome of its foreign policy’ in a complex world.³⁴ But from a decolonial perspective, it’s important to recall that historically ‘objective’ research has been used to cement the existing power relations as ‘natural’.^{35,36}

Therefore, while the decentring agenda seems to entail a practical dimension that can be credited for enhancing the applicability and comprehensibility for students and stakeholders, there is a risk of falling into methodic, ‘ticking the box’ exercises that obfuscate the complexities that are inherent to postcolonial developments and continuing colonialities. It also carries the risk that the latter becomes depoliticized. Instead, decolonial agendas aim to politicize ‘local space’:³⁷ they are more explicitly normative from the outset, but the decentring agenda is no less normative in spite of its veil of ‘objectivity’ and ‘neutrality’. Our decolonial standpoint requires acknowledging the historical epistemological injustices, prioritize the voices and narratives about ‘Europe’ of those communities that have been historically subjugated,³⁸ and positioning ourselves politically while also unveiling

³³ Keukeleire & Lecocq, *supra* n. 8, at 280. Similarly, Keuleers, Fonck & Keukeleire clarify that they see EU-centrism in the narrow sense of research focus on the EU and not in the ‘far more loaded’ and ‘normative’ sense of the West occupying centre stage in world history. F. Keuleers, D. Fonck & S. Keukeleire, *Beyond EU Navel-Gazing: Taking Stock of EU-centrism in the Analysis of EU Foreign Policy*, 51 (3) *Coop. Confl.* 361 (2016).

³⁴ Keukeleire & Lecocq, *supra* n. 4, at 306.

³⁵ See E. A. Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (Routledge 1997); G. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *The Cognitive Empire, Politics of Knowledge and African Intellectual Productions: Reflections on Struggles for Epistemic Freedom and Resurgence of Decolonisation in the Twenty-First Century*, 42(5) *Third World Q.* 882–901 (2021).

³⁶ This also involves more attention for the international political economy of research and knowledge production and the international division of labour in research (see e.g., M. Sukarieh & S. Tannock, *Subcontracting Academia: Alienation, Exploitation and Disillusionment in the UK Overseas Syrian Refugee Research Industry*, 51(2) *Antipode* 664–680 (2019)).

³⁷ Compare M. Sabaratnam, *IR in Dialogue ... But Can We Change the Subjects? A Typology of Decolonising Strategies for the Study of World Politics*, 39(3) *Millennium* 797 (2011).

³⁸ See A. Oleart & A. Van Weyenberg, *Narrating ‘Europe’: A Contested Imagined Community*, 66(4) *Politique Européenne* (2019).

how research agendas that are framed as ‘objective’ are using this legitimacy to flatten decolonial approaches.

Thirdly, the decentring agenda attempts to raise concerns that could be resolved through the inclusiveness it purports to achieve. According to Keukeleire and Lecocq, ‘decentring requires scholars and practitioners to attempt understanding phenomena which may be considered illegitimate or morally problematic, as is reflected in the debate on ... whether beliefs and practices embedded in different cultures can be analysed without prior ethical judgement’.³⁹ While their concern touches on an important issue, it misses a key point about how to redress Eurocentrism. Better engaging with scholars from underrepresented backgrounds is an accessible way to avoid cultural relativism or further pushing Eurocentric interpretations. Such scholars are uniquely equipped to fill knowledge gaps and certainly can do so while remaining objective, scientific and understandable to a broad audience. Additionally, promoting trans- and inter-disciplinarity can enable political scientists and other policy scholars to access historical, cultural, linguistic and anthropological insights where it is lacking and offers the opportunity for disciplines to work together towards a decolonial future.

Overall, such differences may not be surprising, as they have different theoretical roots and correspond to the familiar tensions within all social struggles between revisionist versus radical strands. In this way, the ‘decentring’ and ‘decolonizing’ agendas have conflicting views. It might be envisageable to adapt a ‘decentring’ discourse – and thus avoid references to the ‘jungle’ and the ‘garden’ – without meaningfully changing the underlying colonial ideological paradigm. Both agendas are driven by a strong desire to better reflect on complicated issues of diversity. However, decolonial thinking and praxis are addressing the roots and consequences of colonialism and coloniality in their analysis rather than ‘decentring’ Europe.

Some may argue that they might be complementary in that decolonial approaches could ideally create more space for political debates within which decentring approaches could then advance pragmatic improvements and induce gradual evolutions towards systemic change. There is however no guarantee that this would happen, especially if decentring and post/decolonial agendas continue to be conflated. While decentring may lead to a more legitimate and effective EU foreign policy, it may also not diminish or may even reinforce the coloniality of EU power. Thus, rather than ‘decentring Europe’, we ought to move towards decolonial futures that truly prioritize the democratic struggle against colonial continuities.

³⁹ Keukeleire & Lecocq, *supra* n. 4, at 308.