

**The decentering agenda:  
A post-colonial approach to EU external action \***

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*Mainstream studies of European Union (EU) external action are typically Eurocentric, neglecting the perspectives of many to whom such action is directed. This chapter explores the challenges of ‘decentering’ EU external action by importing insights from post-colonial studies into what we call ‘Global EU External Action Studies’. We suggest that when it comes to the EU, the ‘post’ in post-colonialism can refer to two distinct meanings. Analytically, ‘post’-colonial practices refer to the reproduction of hierarchical logics. Normatively, ‘post’-colonialism refers to the desirable transcendence of these logics. We propose a three-step approach to decentering as strategy towards a post-colonial Europe in the second sense: ‘provincializing’ the EU’s experience, ‘engaging’ others’ views, and ‘reconstructing’ EU external action. We then turn to sites where the EU’s external relations have been characteristically Eurocentric, namely Turkey and the Middle East and North Africa. We conclude by identifying possible pathways to reconstructing relations in a ‘multilogical’ fashion.*

**Introduction**

Unlike the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, we live in a non-European and increasingly post-Western world. In this chapter, we discuss the implications of this reality for the study and practice of European Union (EU) external action. We argue that the EU’s relations with the rest of the world cannot be understood short of engaging with the colonial legacies of many of its member states, and the colonial echoes detected in its actions by many of its external partners. A post-colonial approach, in short, requires both analytical and normative reckoning with habits of Eurocentrism which have long shaped European foreign policies, an undertaking that we have described as the ‘decentering agenda’ (Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis, 2013; Nicolaïdis, Sebe and Maas, 2015; Keukeleire and Lecocq, 2018; see also Keukeleire and Lecocq in this volume, Nicolaïdis, 2020).

To be sure, EU member states bring different pasts and foreign policy traditions to the Union. Some were colonial powers of varied longevity (e.g. Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom). Others live with memories of imperial subordination: to the Ottoman and Habsburg empires in southeastern Europe; to the UK in Ireland; to the Soviet Union in eastern Europe. Echoes of empire resonate more or less loudly depending on when and how decolonization took place, the presence of colonial subjects in today's metropolises, and the sociological make-up of the societies in question. Across these multiple variations, the EU's colonial inheritance(s) warrant scrutiny short of undue generalizations.

Yet, the legacies of colonialism are rarely acknowledged in mainstream approaches to EU external action, nor is their impact on contemporary policies probed (Behr and Stivachtis, 2015; Mayer 2008). We believe that this lack of reflexivity diminishes the Union's normative resonance and its functional efficiency (Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis, 2013; 2015). We live, after all, in what Acharya (2017) calls an emergent 'multiplex' world of plural modernities, an approach which eschews an a-cultural understanding of multipolarity. The worldviews of rising actors across the Pacific Rim, South Asia, and the Middle East, to Africa and Latin America remain sensitized to the impact of European colonialism on their states and societies. At a juncture when China, the rising 21<sup>st</sup> century (super)power, strategically frames international outreach as an alternative to Western neo-colonialism, failure to confront the legacies of empire in EU external action is self-defeating.

It is against this backdrop that we channel the 'decentring agenda' towards a 'Global EU External Action Studies' (GEU EAS) which infuses both the study of EU external action *and* action itself with a post-colonial ethos. Inspired by a rich, interdisciplinary literature engaged with post-colonialism, we suggest that GEU EAS must grapple with at least two dimensions of the 'post' in post-colonial: first, in analytical terms, the 'post' as reproduction of Eurocentric hierarchies must be confronted; second, in normative terms, the 'post' as transcendence of Eurocentrism should be pursued (Nicolaïdis and Fisher-Onar, 2015), moves which also require confronting echoes of colonialism at the intersection of internal and external dynamics.

The journey towards ‘post’ as transcendence can unfold via three steps: the first is to ‘provincialize’ historical and contemporary accounts of world affairs which privilege European experiences and perceptions. The second step, ‘engagement’, entails exploration of how ‘non-European’ actors experience international relations. The third move, ‘reconstruction’, is an attempt to recalibrate EU policies to reflect the work of provincialization and engagement. In principle, the three steps flow logically from critical self-reflection to open-ended engagement to mutually empowering reconstitution; in practice, however, the steps unfold simultaneously as the analyst/practitioner and their interlocutors are transformed by the exercise of decentring (see below for details).

Below, we first review the intellectual sources of the framework and outline the three components of our decentred approach. We then turn to EU relations with Turkey and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) which, we contend, entail counterproductive neo-colonial logics. We conclude by making the case for a multilogical approach to advance the analytical and normative, but also pragmatic goal of confronting colonial legacies for a truly Global EU external action which acknowledges the constitutive role of Europe’s ‘Others’ in the European project.

### **State of the art: post-colonial inspiration for Global EU External Action Studies**

The critical first step towards decentring is to recognize the reproduction of colonial power relations by EU institutions and member states in their dealings with the rest of the world. The scholar’s role is to foreground the conceptual and empirical building blocks for the journey towards transcending these legacies, a task facilitated by ideas produced by generations of post-colonial scholars across disciplines. While we can only be extremely schematic, we invoke several seminal sources and their significance for EU external action.

An early critique of the hierarchical logic of European colonialism is the work of activist intellectuals during the period of formal decolonization. Figures like Frantz Fanon on Algeria to Léopold Senghor on Senegal or Edward Said on Palestine challenged colonial mindsets and practices which both dominate and render invisible the experiences of the colonized. Contrary

to a common European view of third-world nationalism, the intellectual and political effervescence of such anti-colonial struggles entailed a complex articulation of national and cosmopolitan ideals linked to South-South solidarity. This was reflected in forms of transnational mobilization like the non-aligned movement of formerly colonized states during the Cold War, pan-Africanism or pan-Arabism (Pham and Shilliam, 2016).

Students in and of South Asia, for their part, went on to foster 'subaltern studies' (appropriating the Gramscian term for people who are suppressed by the ruling classes).<sup>1</sup> Seeking to recover the voices of peasants and other marginalized groups, the movement generated powerful conceptual tools for the transcendence of colonial legacies. Examples include Homi Bhabha's (2003) notions of 'hybridity' and 'mimicry' which respectively invoke the syncretic sensibilities, and the strategic adaptation of post-colonial subjects in defiance of categories like 'European' vs. 'non-European.'

In still other regional contexts, a 'decolonial' agenda seeking to delink from the imprint of Western colonialism (as well as nationalism and capitalist modernity) has gained momentum (e.g. Mignolo, 2011).<sup>2</sup> From the Americas to Australasia, decolonial approaches often attend to indigenous struggles to reclaim systems of knowledge and practices negated by European colonizers. An agenda articulated by figures like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2013) and Winona LaDuke (2002), this corpus includes sources for multilogical thinking in what De la Cadena (2005), calls 'relational epistemologies' which emphasize situated knowledge in shaping supposedly universal categories (for example, Amazonian perspectives on 'development').

If distance from Europe affords decolonial possibilities, a 'post'-colonial approach which confronts both the tendency to reproduce and the need to transcend colonial habits is arguably both unavoidable and harder to achieve in regions close to the EU. After all, the term 'post-colonial' gained traction when Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) argued that Western knowledge production about the 'Orient' and the Middle East in particular had long served (neo-)colonial projects. Systematic representations of the 'East' as, say, 'decadent', 'despotic', 'fanatical' and 'underdeveloped', irrespective of realities on the ground, enabled portrayal of the 'West' in opposite terms: as 'dynamic,' 'freedom-loving,' 'rational' and 'advanced'. Such frames, in turn,

rationalized either the exclusion or the domination of ‘Others’ from Western political projects. Orientalist frames which privilege the ‘West’ over the ‘Rest’ are still evident in certain EU responses to migration, or President Donald Trump’s attempts to ban Muslim and demonize Hispanic immigrants to the United States.

Arguably, the very idea of a European ‘neighbourhood’ of concentric circles—a pillar of EU foreign policy—is itself Eurocentric. Much EU external action is organized around these circles from trade negotiations to border and identity politics. A decentered approach challenges the discounting of southern and eastern angles on such issues, recognizing that European perspectives are themselves shaped by post-colonial ‘movements’ into the EU, both historically and today (Kinnvall, 2016; Grovogui, 2001; Hall, 2015). Recognizing that the post-colonial is constitutive of Europe as much as of Europe’s ‘Others’ offers students and practitioners of a global EU external action fresh and plural perspectives on key issues like migration and security.

Efforts to affirm non-European perspectives have advanced in fields like cultural studies, history, geography, anthropology, and sociology.<sup>3</sup> And while some in the global south may suspect that western(-based) scholars collude to preserve western primacy, the decentring agenda is a *global* critical endeavour. Within the relatively conservative discipline of International Relations (IR), calls to decentre (Nayak and Selbin, 2010; Tickner and Wæver, 2009) also have gained momentum, often under the umbrella of a ‘Global IR’ (Acharya, 2014; Ling and Bilgin, 2017) which takes as baseline our shared, yet differentiated, stakes in the planet. A global approach highlights normative grounds for contestation of global governance from ‘below’ and from ‘outside’ on the part of multiple state and non-state actors (Hurrell, 2018).

Work in the decentring spirit has helped to challenge Eurocentric readings of international order like the expansion of ‘European international society’ (Keene, 2002) while highlighting the pathologies of liberal interventionism and state-building (Sabaratnam, 2013). Visions informed by Islamic, Sikh, Daoist, and neo-Confucian cosmologies, among others, explore alternative meanings of concepts like sovereignty or sustainability (Shani, 2008; Ling, 2013; Kavalski, 2020). Still other interventions decentre specific topics like security or human rights (Barkawi and Laffey, 2006; Acharya and Buzan, 2009), challenging conventional wisdom in policy-relevant

ways. Such work captures, for example, the practical irrelevance of nuclear deterrence for much of humanity, or the disproportionate impact of civil war and climate change on vulnerable communities in the South.

To be sure, there are blind spots in this corpus including, according to Hurrell (2018), its preoccupation with global power structures, or emphasis on differences at the expense of thinking in symbiosis with others. Nevertheless, the framework can help both scholars and practitioners of GEU EAS interested in reading the EU and its external action through a post-colonial prism.

### **How to decentre: towards Global EU External Action Studies**

Overcoming (neo-)colonial habits represent no small challenge for a region which dominated many parts of the globe for four of the past five centuries via waves of conquest which fundamentally transformed the places and peoples that—beholden to European epistemic hegemony—we call ‘Asian’, ‘African’, ‘American’, or ‘Australian’.<sup>4</sup> Skeptical EU scholars might argue, moreover, that confronting colonial legacies is not the task of EU external action. To be sure, Europe is not co-terminus with the West or US hegemony, nor is the EU simply the current incarnation of ‘Europe’. Ever since its early days, the European integration project was framed as a ‘virgin birth’ free from member states’ colonial pasts, a frame which led EU institutions to develop their own logic, instruments and projects, imbued with atonement for past wrongs and support for multilateral equality (Nicolaidis, 2015).

Nevertheless, Europe’s colonial habits continue to matter in its relations with the rest of the world. The post-World War II European peace project was primarily about transcending *intra*-European differences, starting with the Franco-German core. Only in the 1990s was this reconciliatory logic projected to Europe’s periphery. Meanwhile the early ‘Eurafrika’ project, predicated on pooling sovereignty in Europe in order to pool colonies in Africa, has all but been erased from the narrative of European integration (Hansen and Jonsson, 2015; Nicolaidis, 2015), as is the contemporaneous story of decolonization (Pace and Roccu, 2020). Moreover, with the Cold War rehabilitation of western Europe into the ‘first’ world, neo-colonial hierarchies were

re-established vis-à-vis the eastern ‘second’ world and the southern ‘third’ world. This further entrenched post-colonial North-South cleavages which structure international affairs to this day. The EU is sometimes called a ‘community of memory’ but this is a truncated memory of the war it waged on itself, not the wars it has waged on others before and after the Second World War.

Recognizing this persistent historical blind spot, and inspired by the aforementioned literature, we propose that decentring be pursued via three steps: provincializing, engagement, and reconstruction. As noted, there is a sequential logic to these steps, but in practice they entail an overlapping learning process in which insights from ‘provincializing Europe’ (Chakrabarty, 2008) inform efforts towards engagement and reconstruction.

1. *Provincialization* is to recognize that despite the undeniable European mark on global modernity, European experiences are not universal given multiple pathways to economic and political modernity across the globe. Nor indeed are European experiences homogenous or uniquely ‘European’ given the constitutive contributions of the colonized through labour, resources and migration to the consolidation of European nation-states and the EU project (Hobson, 2012; Bhambra, 2016; Kinnvall, 2016). To provincialize then is a first step towards pluralizing our reading of the world by recognizing that Europe is but one geographical site and conceptual vantage point from which to study and practice international relations. Provincializing, as such, is an attempt to confront ‘post’ as reproduction of colonial reflexes by recognizing the particularistic rather than universal nature of European histories, perspectives and agendas.
2. *Engagement* is to listen to others’ perceptions of the EU as, say, a regional integration project, trade actor, aid provider or security partner (Lenz and Nicolaidis, 2019; Manners, 2015; see also Chaban and Elgström in this volume). Beyond perceptions of the EU, however, it is important to learn generally about normative resources and practical solutions to outstanding challenges which those designated as non-European have developed irrespective of Europe or the West.

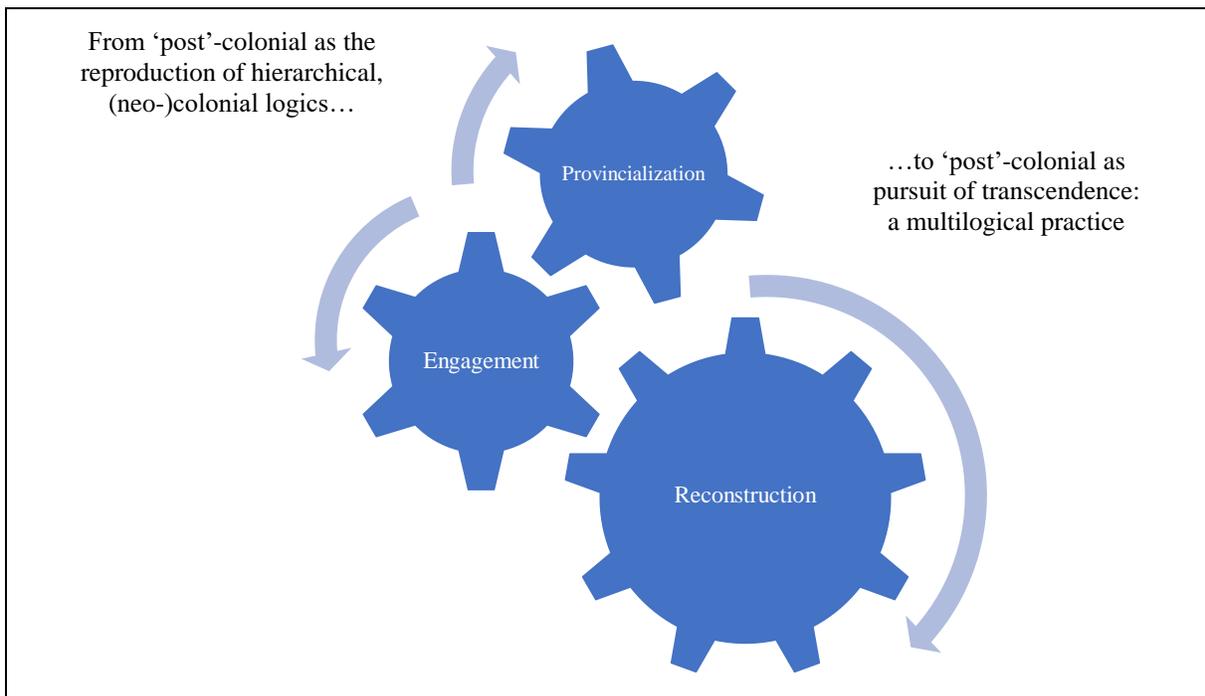
Engagement can be essential in negotiations where historical legacies loom large (Jones and Weinhardt, 2015). Sensitivities are especially associated with Europe's propensity to export 'civilization' or 'Standards of Civilization'. This was a legal and political doctrine developed during 19<sup>th</sup> century high imperialism which equated state capacity and national values with 'civilized', 'semi-civilized' and 'barbaric' status, assigning European states the role of gatekeeper into the international system of sovereign states (for similarities and differences between the EU accession conditions and the 'Standard of Civilization', see Nicolaïdis et al., 2014).

Engagement is also an invitation to explore what Staeger (2016, 982) describes as the 'vast co-constitution' of Europe and its Others. For example, histories of entanglement have led to the internalization of Eurocentric frames of reference by many putatively non-European actors (Aydın-Düzgüt et al., 2020). Mindfulness of mutual constitution also can help to avoid the trap of uncritical celebration of other perspectives which may be problematic in their own right, especially vis-a-vis vulnerable groups around the globe like women or minorities (Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis, 2013). The purpose, in short, is not to jettison the emancipatory promise of European approaches to global governance along with Eurocentrism, but to engage plural cultural resources towards better confronting our common challenges as humanity.

3. *Reconstruction* is the necessary third step for a Global EU External Action Studies committed to drawing prescriptive implications. We are not oblivious, of course, to the fact that the EU and its member states act to advance their own interests. This is why the decentring agenda aims to support a more effective—not altruistic—external action, through a multilogical approach to policy development and implementation. Reconstruction thus involves identifying self-defeating Eurocentric pitfalls in EU policy frames, strategies and programmes, and highlighting the incipient promise of transformation in shared commitments regarding security, development, climate change, or the prospects of vulnerable groups.

Reconstruction begins with researchers and practitioners who provincialize and engage towards identifying more inclusive policies. Endeavours can be operationalized at the official bi- or multilateral levels or be pursued informally through, say, second-track diplomatic initiatives drawing together expertise and diverse perspectives across academic, journalistic, activist and private sector stakeholders. Box 15.1 visualizes the decentring approach just described.

### Box 15.1 The Decentering Agenda



To illustrate the benefits of a multilogical analytical and policy process we turn to two cases where EU external action traditionally reflects Eurocentric or neocolonial logics: Turkey and the MENA region. In each case, we ask: How does the 'post'-colonial as reproduction of Eurocentric hierarchies shape relations? Applying our three-step heuristic as method, we identify moments and issue areas where a decentered approach which seeks to transcend by confronting Eurocentrism (in relations with Turkey) and neo-colonial reflexes (in relations with the MENA) arguably would yield more effective policies.

#### Case study I: decentring EU-Turkey relations

Turkey presents an intriguing case for asking how ‘post’ as the reproduction of colonial logics shapes relations because the country was never formerly colonized and is the successor state of an eclipsed multiregional empire in its own right. As such, few analysts have employed post-colonial frames to make sense of the country’s turbulent relations with European counterparts. Nevertheless, a rich literature grapples with how Turkey’s liminality or ‘in-betweenness’ vis-à-vis ‘Europe’ and the ‘Middle East’ (or ‘Islam’) persistently informs its identity and international relations (Yanık, 2011). These categories, the assumption that they are mutually exclusive, and the privileging of ‘Europe’s’ side of the story all exemplify a Eurocentric geocultural imagination which downgrades those deemed as ‘Other’ (see also Rumelili in this volume). Turkey’s experience is also instructive because it entails ‘family resemblances’ with other re-emerging former empires like China and Russia (Fisher-Onar, 2020). As with Turkey, these powers’ eclipse by Europe and the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, respectively, inform revisionist foreign policies today which seek to reverse the perceived negation of their agency in international affairs (Fisher-Onar, 2013; forthcoming; Morozov, 2015).

#### *Post’ as reproduction*

Enduring Eurocentric hierarchies in EU-Turkey relations are evident in institutional and cultural logics inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup> century era of Ottoman eclipse and the nationalist project which 20<sup>th</sup> leaders forged in response. For example, fraught accession negotiations since 2004 echo a longstanding ambivalence at European conditionalities dating back to the ‘Standard of Civilization, discussed above, which assigned Ottoman Turkey ‘semi-civilized’ ranking (a peg up from the ‘barbarian’ designation of the officially colonized). Yet, European great powers simultaneously subverted Ottoman attempts at reform by supporting secessionist minorities, and through the practice of ‘capitulations’ (extraterritorial jurisdiction to protect European interests). This historical experience of compromised sovereignty and ‘stigmatization’ in international society (Zarakol, 2010) continues to echo in Ankara’s ambivalent response to key EU demands regarding institutional reform and minority rights.

Culturally too, the era of European global preponderance and its legacies spurred successive generations of Ottoman and Turkish reformers to resist—but also to internalize—European Orientalism vis-à-vis the role of Islam (Fisher-Onar and Evin, 2011). This dynamic was evident in Atatürk’s cultural revolution during the 1920s which can be read through the prism of Bhabha’s ‘mimicry’ (2015, see literature review above). The concept captures how adoption of European norms offers those on the receiving end of European hegemony a survival strategy. In Turkey’s case, Westernizing reforms sought to position a secularized but culturally Muslim Turkey on equal footing with Europe’s secularized but culturally Christian nation-states. Turkey’s Westernism was rewarded when it joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1952.

However, 1989 augured the return of history as Christian Democrats and, subsequently, far-right forces across the EU questioned Turkey’s European credentials on civilizational grounds. Such views were amplified by the challenge which migration from Muslim-majority Turkey (and the MENA more broadly) was perceived to pose to European social cohesion – hence the importance of the internal-external optic when assessing Europe’s external action. Perceptions of Turkey’s non-Europeanness were further exacerbated by the aftermath of 9/11, as populist purveyors of Islamophobia framed Ankara’s potential accession as an existential threat to Europe.

### *Multilogical possibilities*

Nevertheless, the new millennium brought the possibility of ‘post’ as transcendence when Turkey was awarded candidacy in 1999, and EU membership was extended to twelve states across eastern and southeastern Europe in 2004 and 2007. These policies were accompanied by debates about cosmopolitanism as a guiding ethos. The idea was that an inclusive, multicultural Europe was coalescing at the vanguard of international society, a post- or multi-national union based on atonement for past wrongs and recognition of the Other within and beyond. The project thus entailed provincialization in that it welcomed a multiplicity of cultural identities as constitutive of the EU.

To be sure, expectations remained unillogical in that assimilation to the norms and practices of ‘EUtopia’ was expected (Lenz and Nicolaïdis, 2019; Bechev and Nicolaïdis, 2010). Nevertheless, in practical terms, the authorization of resources and creation of multiple fora for engagement towards transformative reconstruction of the European and Turkish projects was evident in policies—many of which were spearheaded by Greece – which supported effervescent civil society conversations across borders. Similarly, incorporation of scholars and students from Turkey into programmes like Erasmus fostered formative connections.

The allure of a Europe embarked upon multillogical dialogue with its ‘Others’, in turn, helped many in Turkey to begin a journey of transcendence of defensive nationalism. This potential was evident in the passage during the early 2000s of a series of laws like minority language rights by policymakers who were traditionally Euro-skeptic. The prospect of accession to an eventual, multillogical Europe continued to inform de-securitization of Turkey’s Kurdish question until the early 2010s, as well as post-national activism within Turkey towards confronting the loss of the late Ottoman Christian communities (Başaran, 2017).

Ultimately, however, the unillogical structure of accession negotiations and perceived double standards (regarding Muslim Turkey’s membership prospects in comparison to opportunities offered to majority Christian states) led to disappointment with the EU by the late 2000s, even among Westernist segments of Turkey’s population (Fisher-Onar, 2021a). The ambivalence was amplified by narratives from prominent EU figures like President of the European Convention Valerie Giscard d’Estaing or then French President Nicholas Sarkozy, who urged EU publics to resist Turkey’s membership on cultural grounds, even during the period when Ankara was making apparent progress on the formal accession criteria. Turkey’s leadership responded by channeling anger at the perceived gap between the Union’s inclusive promises and exclusionary practices towards an internal battle for control of the state which culminated in the backsliding of Turkey’s democracy, human rights, and rule of law (Saatçioğlu, 2016). While primary responsibility for these outcomes lies within Turkey, to be sure, the attenuation of membership prospects due to resistance amongst some EU leaders and publics to provincialize, engage and reconstruct relations in a multillogical fashion contributed to the process and today’s troubled EU-Turkey relationship.

## Case study II: decentring EU-MENA relations

As suggested by the case of Turkey, Eurocentric reflexes in EU relations with Muslim-majority countries present analytical, normative and practical challenges to policy-making. Asking again how the ‘post’-colonial as reproduction of Eurocentrism shapes relations with the MENA region, we argue that hierarchical tendencies are compounded by legacies of direct colonial rule including the centre-periphery configuration of migration and trade. Thus, despite diverse colonial experiences, post-independence pathways and talk of ‘Euro-Med’ region building, MENA relations with Europe remain enmeshed in neo-colonial dynamics (Adler et al, 2006).

If this pattern is especially salient with regard to France and the UK, colonial legacies also inform Italy’s and Spain’s roles as enforcers of ‘Fortress Europe’ in the increased securitization of borders with MENA countries (alongside a Greece implicated in its own semi-subaltern struggles). Similarly, at the level of EU external action—and despite intermittent language from figures like former High Representative Ashton, which invoke ‘post-imperial partnerships for a post-imperial age’—multiple examples of the ‘post’-colonial as reproduction can be pinpointed (cited in Staeger, 2016). Indeed, it seems apt to characterize the EU as a normative empire in a region where it seeks to export its norms through increasingly coercive mechanisms (Del Sarto, 2016).

In this section, we gesture to two themes in EU-MENA relations which, we argue, would benefit from provincialization, engagement and reconstruction: colonial amnesia and the critical gap between the EU’s normative claims and more realist policy priorities. We then explore how a decentred approach to policy might work, inspired by activist scholarship on ‘bordering’.

### *Post’ as reproduction*

A pernicious form of neo-colonialism in EU-MENA relations is, paradoxically, its invisibility: the resistance of national and EU-level actors to confronting historical violence conducted under the banner of ‘civilizing missions’ which claimed to save colonial subjects from their purported

barbarity while exploiting their labor and resources. Amnesia, for instance, enables maintenance of ‘colonial innocence’ by permitting states to downplay the number of casualties perpetuated during metropolitan attempts to reassert colonial rule during decolonization struggles, for instance, in Algeria.

Yet, amnesia—especially regarding formative traumas—is ‘very partial and unsustainable at best’ (Frank, cited in McCormack, 2010, 15). As controversies which flow from the repressed events manifest, memories percolate disruptively back into present politics and international relations. The effect is to ‘redirect’ historical energies, as with the former European colonisers ineffectively attempting to atone for their past wealth extractive behavior through the EC (Nicolaïdis, 2015) or as seen with the playing out of France’s persistent ‘Algerian question’ (Stora, 2005), post-colonial conflicts in Cyprus and Israel-Palestine, and the imbrication of these tensions in EU attempts to manage trade, migration, and security.

Thus, a first form of provincializing when it comes to the MENA region is to confront amnesia: without remembrance, one cannot even grasp why ‘they’ might be restive, much less how to move forward. The normative and practical purchase of confronting grim pasts is attested to by the international legitimacy conferred to Germany by its atonement for the Nazi regime (although, like other EU states, atonement has neglected colonial atrocities beyond Europe in places like Namibia).

Similarly, the fraught timbre of EU-MENA relations could be improved by recognizing post-colonial frustration at the historical denial of agency and dignity and its echoes today (Fisher-Onar, 2021b). Provincializing one’s own pain and recognizing that of ‘Others’ could contribute, in turn, to the neutralization of radical elements seeking to exploit such sentiments. All too regularly, however, EU officials and pundits ‘deny the validity of decolonial critique,’ arguing, as Staeger documents, that Europe should ‘bring a close to its colonial guilt,’ while asking that the colonized ‘give up playing the victim,’ so that that Europe can ‘relax’ about its long fulfilled “retreat from Empire’ (2016, 986).

Persistent Eurocentrism, in turn, opens the door to a second blind spot in EU-MENA relations: insistence on European prescriptions of liberal democracy as a ‘one size fits all’ solution (Bicchi, 2006) to MENA problems. As Pace et al. argue, unreflexive attempts at norm diffusion counterproductively marginalize the ‘domestic production of democratic norms because they do not seem to fit with European conceptualizations of how a polity should be governed or organized’ (2009, 1). Setting a liberal democratic bar reflecting Europeans’ self-image means, moreover, that the EU may fail to live up when it promotes trade and security policies that ‘stumble upon European trade and diplomacy-related interests’ (Lazarou et al., 2013, 171), arenas where the EU arguably behaves more like a ‘neo-liberal hegemon’ according to Günay (2015), or in Volpi’s (2009) view, a sort of Orientalist realist with little conviction in the region’s ability to democratize.

The upshot is a critical gap between discursive promotion of democratization and ‘strategic patience’ or even cynicism—a pattern of hedging on the side of regime stability when it comes to support for grassroots, pro-democracy MENA mobilizations versus authoritarian governments (e.g. during the 2011 Arab uprisings, but also the 2019 protests across Algeria, Lebanon and Sudan). This under-the-radar but persistent ‘power political instrumentalism’ (Youngs, 2004) was given rare, explicit expression when a prominent diplomat, Robert Cooper called for a ‘new liberal imperialism’ (2002) that reflected the historical Standard of Civilization in its two-tiered approach to the ‘pre-modern’ or post-colonial world: ‘Among ourselves,’ Cooper argued, ‘we operate on the basis of laws...but when we are operating in the jungle, we must also use the laws of the jungle’. Yet, as Stelzenmüller’s (2012) analysis of these comments suggests, neo-colonial double standards are ‘no longer tenable’ in a non-European world where the Union’s ‘legitimacy has become one of its key strategic assets’. This reality is especially salient in the MENA where post-colonial sensitivities run high and borders are, quite literally, fluid.

*Towards ‘post’ as transcendence: bordering as a multilogical practice*

EU policy has evolved, to be sure, in pragmatic response to the complex situation on the ground through the pursuit of differentiated strategies. This has yielded some successes in engagement with local actors, against the backdrop of continued support for illiberal actors and authoritarian

regimes (Dandashly and Noutcheva, 2019). Yet, critics argue that all too often EU-MENA relations—including aid and humanitarian regimes which govern borders—reinforce the binary imaginary of a ‘peaceful Europe and its conflictual others’ (Cebeci, 2018). This securitization of Others also glosses over the ethical dilemmas which characterize EU policies at the internal-external nexus (Wolff, 2008).

In response, some analysts argue that more effective EU-MENA relations require decentered engagement of wide-ranging stakeholders beyond but also within the EU. By provincializing Eurocentric perspectives and engaging multiple ‘visions’ (Pace, 2014) and ‘peripheral’ experiences (Huber and Kamel, 2016), including non-state and non-urban perspectives, researchers and policymakers can learn to read and respond to complex challenges in a multilogical fashion. As discussed in El Qadim et al.’s (2020) symposium on decentring border management, a multilogical approach attentive not only to formal policies but to the plurality and contingency of everyday experiences of migration can help to grasp the mobilizing power, for better and for worse, of local frames for policy action. For example, concepts like ‘hospitality’ in Greek, or ‘guest’ and ‘honour’ in Turkey’s contested border regimes, and the importance of ‘dignity’ as a key element in Morocco’s position on migration negotiation with the EU can help to explore insights into how to mobilize support for border policies. Similarly, desecuritizing strategies pursued by activists for migrant rights in France and Belgium, and the ways that media like art and film can allow migrants to express their differentiated aspirations—(including specific challenges faced by women)—offer ‘inside-out’ and ‘outside-in’ insights into migration policies.

As in the case of Eurocentrism vis-a-vis Turkey, we find persistent neo-colonial logics in EU-MENA relations, amnesia of historical violence and a glaring gap between avowed liberal support for democratization which remains optional, and hard realist policies aimed at stability, security and economic interests (Del Sarto 2016). Whilst Turkey was not formerly colonized and MENA countries’ post-colonial experiences are varied, a two-tiered logic remains which denies Turkish and MENA agencies and undermines the EU’s ability to support its own stated goals, namely region-building around the Mediterranean which can only happen if owned by its citizens. Only by engaging the region’s plural perspectives on, say, the production and

contestation of EU-MENA migration policies, can the EU craft more inclusive, and ultimately successful policies.

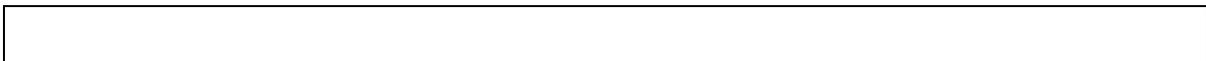
## **Conclusion**

Inspired by the interdisciplinary literature engaged with post-colonialism, we have argued that students and practitioners of European Union external action must grapple with at least two dimensions of the ‘post’ in post-colonial: first, analytically the ‘post’ as reproduction of Eurocentric hierarchies must be confronted; second and normatively, ‘post’ as transcendence of Eurocentrism must be pursued. This journey can be embarked upon via a three-step approach: provincializing, engaging, and reconstructing European roles through multilogical encounters. We then turned to EU relations with Turkey and the MENA as illustrative of recalcitrant Eurocentric habits, but also of the promise of multilogical practices if and when they are pursued.

The development of a multilogical Global EU External Action Studies and practice faces many challenges. What issues and whose voices are included in multilogical dialogue? How to account—analytically, normatively, and practically—for the mutual constitution of external and internal in EU relations with neighbours it has long dominated? As we decentre, moreover, how to avoid empowering other centres’ hegemonic and at times violent practices? The goal of a multilogical approach, after all, is to eschew neocolonial habits which demand that others converge with European practices without giving up the EU project of empowering its Others (within and beyond) via democratization, rule of law, and supporting the rights of the vulnerable. What is certain is that without striving for a decentred approach, we risk empowering atavism both inside and outside.

Box 15.2. summarizes the post-colonial approach to studying EU external action.

### **Box 15.2 Decentring EU external action: a post-colonial approach**



- In an increasingly non-European world, scholars and practitioners of EU external action need to decentre by confronting the ‘post’ in post-colonial towards analytically overcoming patterns of reproducing colonial hierarchies and normatively transcending neo-colonialism.
- A decentred Global External Action Studies can be pursued via a three-step approach based on provincialization, engagement, and reconstruction, towards a multilogical vision with which to interpolate between diverse perspectives on key policy concerns for more effective outcomes overall.
- Specific research and policy areas ripe for a multilogical approach that incorporates ‘bottom-up’ and ‘inside-out’ perspectives include migration, border regimes, security and trade.

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<sup>2</sup> Other key exponents include Ramón Grosfoguel, María Lugones, Nelson Maldonado-Torres and Anibal Quijano.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the work across these disciplines of Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Martin Bernal, J.M. Blaut, Janet Abu-Lughod, Andre Gunder Frank and Samir Amin.

<sup>4</sup> 'Asia' and 'Africa' derive from Greco-Roman usage as does 'australis', a mysterious southern realm invoked during British expansion in the early 1800s. The 'Americas' were named for early modern Italian navigator Amerigo Vespucci.