Decentring Europe:
Critical Approaches to European Foreign Policy

Research Seminar
7 March 2019
University of London Institute in Paris

Concept note

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Objectives

The aim of this research seminar is to further develop the 'Decentring Agenda' for EU foreign policy which was introduced by Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis in 2013. Participants will work together on refining the theoretical framework of the agenda and consider potential ways for its practical application in various policy fields. In so doing, they will contribute to the on-going discussion on the place, role and possibilities of the EU in world politics. The keynote speakers will provide an overview of the agenda and its most recent theoretical and conceptual evolution as well as practical results from both academic and practitioner viewpoints. The following thematic ateliers will then focus on its operationalisation in four specific areas, namely: class and gender peripheries, migration and borders, religion and secularism, democracy promotion and the rule of law. The keynote presentations and the ateliers combined will be the first step in a collective effort to finetuning a detailed decentring approach that will benefit not only the academic field of European studies, but also policy-makers in their strategic and operational work.

Decentring Europe: A critical approach

Scholars working in the postcolonialist tradition have long identified systemic defects in European agency, pointing first and foremost to the flaws of Eurocentrism (see Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Chakrabarty, 2000). Such accounts combined with poststructuralist, neo-Marxist, feminist and Critical Social Theory approaches have led critical scholarship to shed light on the Eurocentric tendencies deeply inscribed in the European integration project (Borg and Diez, 2016; Manners, 2006). Analyses have revealed the continued prevalence of territorial imagery in European policy-making (Diez, 1996), the exclusionary practices exercised along the EU's borders as well as internally (van Houtum and Boedeltje, 2009; van Houtum and Pijpers, 2007), and, accordingly, the widespread 'violent' practices applied in the formation of bounded identities (Ashley, 1988). These characteristics are in contradiction with the EU's supposed image of a 'postmodern promise' that breaks with the violent practices of the modern state (Borg and Diez, 2016). Despite these warnings, however, the field of European studies, and in particular the study of EU foreign policy, remain marked by Eurocentric perspectives to date (Keuleers et al, 2016).

Addressing this problem, Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013) called for a paradigm shift towards decentring the study and practice of Europe's international relations with the aim to reconstitute

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European agency in a non-European world. The starting point of their decentring agenda is the acknowledgement of inflections of colonialism in the European project and the consequent attempt to overcome the legacies of a Eurocentric global order. Earlier approaches such as the Normative Power Europe (NPE) concept (Manners, 2002) are seen by them to have failed to satisfy this requirement for building on assumptions such as that of a European civilisationist hierarchy vis-à-vis the rest of the world. The proposed theoretical framework is based on three categories: *provincialisation* – that is, the questioning of deep-rooted Eurocentric narratives –, *engagement* – which refers to the effort to engage the perspectives of others –, and *reconstruction(s)* – i.e. the reconstitution of EU praxis established on mutuality and local empowerment.

Keukeleire and Lecocq (2018) ventured to translate this decentring agenda into an analytical framework which offers 'conceptual lenses and categorizations' to unveil the various dynamics and realities that go beyond dominant Western and Eurocentric categorisations. Their framework reflects on two of the three dimensions proposed by Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis (i.e. *provincialisation* and *engagement*) and consists of six categories (temporal, polity, normative, linguistic, spatial, and disciplinary decentring). Each of these categories are to unmask a different aspect of the prevailing Eurocentric narrative in EU foreign policy and to offer guidance as to how to surpass them through the embracement of provincialisation and engagement. In a subsequent study, Lecocq and Keukeleire (2018) focused more narrowly on the category of polity, providing a decentred conception of legitimate authority structures that move beyond state-centrism, and highlighting the importance of directly engaging these structures in EU foreign policy. This study was published as part of a special issue providing a first attempt to decentring the study of international interventions by investigating the perspectives, interests and practices of actors outside the centres – and centrist views – of the 'Global North' (Schroeder, 2018). Contributions to this special issue thus aim to mitigate current inequalities in knowledge production dynamics by juxtaposing the peripheries of the field of intervention against its centres. For instance, Birkholz et al (2018) focus on Côte d'Ivoire and Lebanon, and with the help of adopting relational perspectives, explore the interconnectedness and co-constitution of relations between interveners and the intervened upon. Millar (2018), on the other hand, highlights that policymakers have so far largely ignored the complexity within and the diversity between different intervention contexts and calls for a policy-oriented research agenda that offers more access and influence to the targets of international interventions. Finally, Wolff (2018) highlights elsewhere that decentring can involve the consideration that secularism is a structural factor of EU foreign policy.

Thematic ateliers

1. Class, gender & peripheries
D. Hubner, moderator; W. Kutz, rapporteur

Reflecting on the pervasiveness of power relations embedded in social institutions – including in EU bodies and policies as well as European studies as such –, this atelier intends to operationalise theories concerning the transformation of the 'mainstream' in EU foreign policy. Through gender mainstreaming as a means of changing existing 'malestream' norms and structures, and the identification of hidden biases regards class-specific interests, the proposed contributions lay the groundwork for a decentred EU foreign policy agenda marked by social sensitivity and the aim to advance social justice on a global scale.

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Key questions:
- How can a decentred agenda take into account economic inequalities and pay more attention to poor parts of the population (in contrast to the often wealthier centres)?
- Is there an EU bias towards a one-size-fits-all model of 'women' liberation in EU gender promotion policies abroad?
- Is there a need to pay more attention to the 'everyday politics' of third countries, namely the quotidian, mundane forms of 'everyday resistance' (Kerkvliet, 2009)?
- Peripheries are diverse and multiple: how can one account for this diversity?
- Is social class undermined as a factor in the EU's engagement with third countries?

2. **Migration and borders**
F. Zardo, moderator; A. Dauchy, rapporteur

Starting from the examination of the structural violence inherent in the formation of bounded identities across Europe and at the core of EU institutions, the target of this atelier is to draw a new operational framework for EU foreign policy and its study on the fields of migration and borders. By reconsidering the EU's practices that lead to 'othering' both along its borders and within its own territory, contributions in this atelier examine ways for decentring the EU's agenda through the provision of an alternative 'modus operandi' to that (re-)producing violent practices.

Key questions:
- How can decentring inform the analysis and practice of EU foreign policy as well as migration and border policies to involve a wider range of relevant stakeholders (e.g. countries of origin, transit countries, countries of destiny, but also migrants and their families, or even the facilitators of irregular migration)?
- Is there a need for more self-reflectivity in EU migration and border policies?
- Can the EU learn from other parts of the world dealing with migration and refugees?
- Is migrants' agency central to the process of decentring?
- Would a better understanding of space and time address the inherent inefficiencies of a Eurocentric migration policy?

3. **Religion and secularism**
S. Wolff, moderator; J. James rapporteur

Drawing on critical reflections towards the prevalence of the European Enlightenment's normative presumptions in the logic of EU policy-making, this atelier aims at the configuration of an operational framework which allows for receptivity to multiple worldviews, social imaginaries, 'philosophies' and the practices these give rise. As opposed to the dominant narrative in EU policy-making and European studies solidifying a particular secular agenda for the EU's external relations, this atelier proposes new frames for a decentred engagement with third parties representing other belief systems.

Key questions:
- Has the EU ignored the religious as a factor of international relations?
- Is the EU's secularism driving the way it 'manages' the religious abroad and in particular Islam?
- Is there a need to de-securitise the religious and to engage genuinely with the religious as a factor of international relations? How?

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4. Democracy promotion and the rule of law
A. Khakee, moderator; M. Burnay, rapporteur

Building on theories that question the universality and indivisibility of the EU's normative framework, this atelier aims at reassessing the role of the EU as a normative power in global politics. Recognising that norms, their interpretation, fields of application and prioritisation vary across time and space, contributions in this atelier aspire to develop a decentred operational design for EU external relations no longer engaging in a *mission civilisatrice*.

Key questions:
- Can a decentred agenda envisage other forms of legitimate authority, deliberation and consultation than those included in Western perspectives on democracy?
- Is it possible to analyse democracy promotion beyond the simple focus on the external democracy promoter?
- Can democracy promotion be understood as a responsibility and action for a multiplicity of agents?
- Is democracy promotion really mainstreamed in other EU external policies?

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