Abstract

How does postcoloniality shape the representation of Europe as a normative power? For several decades the debate about the EU’s role in the world has been dominated by scholars and policy makers that view the EU as a normative power. From this perspective the EU is believed to deal with the external world in a more normative manner compared to ordinary great powers and nation-states. This article proposes a postcolonial approach that problematizes and challenges the way the EU is represented as normative power. The strength of the post-colonial approach outlined in this paper lies in its ability to: (i) trace the (mis)representations of Europe’s past and that (post)colonialism is an inherent feature of the European project; and (ii) trace how EU officials as well as scholarly proponents of the Normative Power Europe (NPE) approach are representing an idea of the EU as the exceptionally ‘good guys’ with a universal relevance. The analysis reveals in particular the Othering, power, and Eurocentrism that lies in such representations.
Introduction

At the Delegation of European Union (EU) Commission in one of the Asian capitals, the Head of Delegation leans back in his chair: ‘So, are we going philosophical [now]?’ he asks in response to the question of how he views the EU as a power and its role in the world today. According to the Head of Delegation, the answer is simple and clear: ‘We are the good guys.’ He continues:

Absolutely. We are the good, unfortunately not strong enough, guys. When I look at what countries like Japan, Korea and China and even Australia and New Zealand have done in terms of negotiations in this region, or in other regions for that matter, you know these people are more hard-nosed than we are. They go in, I mean let alone the Chinese in Africa of course … [waves his hands], these people go in and negotiate real trade deals, for their own interests. They don’t burden their agenda with sustainable development, civil society, […] human rights or freedom of expression. […] I think this really sets us apart from the rest of the world.

This understanding of the EU as ‘the good guys’ and as an ‘exceptional’ global power prompts a number of questions that have been widely discussed in academia for several decades. Notwithstanding the ambiguities surrounding the EU’s role in the world, since around the turn of the millennium there has been more or less an explosion of literature about the EU as a normative and ethical power. Rather similar to the Head of Delegation, many scholars in this debate claim that the EU deals with the external world in a different way compared to ordinary great powers, which are usually driven by geopolitical and national self-interests. This is, the argument goes, because the values promoted internally within the EU, such as social cohesion, the rule of law, democracy, and market economy, are also being projected in the EU’s external relations. As famously stated by Ian Manners in an article inspiring a tremendous number of scholarly publications under the banner of Normative Power Europe (NPE): ‘The concept of normative power is an attempt to suggest that not only is the EU constructed on a normative basis, but importantly that this predisposes it to act in a normative way in world politics’ (Manners 2002: 252; cf. Diez 2005; Fisher Onar and
According to the proponents NPE, Europe’s normative power does not rest on military nor purely economic might, but rather upon ‘ideological power’ or the ‘power over opinion’ and, importantly then, upon: ‘the ability to shape conceptions of ‘normal’’ (Manners 2002: 239). The EU’s role as an international actor is in the view not shaped by what it does or says – but rather by ‘what it is’ (Ibid: 252). Importantly, however, the norms promoted by the EU through its external policies, are not necessarily viewed as specific EU policies, but rather as universal in character and, as such, as being beneficial or progressive to all involved parties (Storey 2006).

NPE has also received criticism from a range of theoretical standpoints. As Sjursen states: ‘Existing conceptions of the EU as a ‘civilian’/‘normative’/‘civilizing’ power lack precision and are normatively biased. There may be ‘normative’ or ‘civilian’ dimensions to EU foreign policy, yet it is problematic to imply, as such conceptualizations do, that the EU is a ‘force for good’ without identifying criteria and assessment standards that make it possible to qualify, substantiate or reject such a claim. How can we know that the EU’s pursuit of norms is legitimate?’ (Sjursen 2006: 235). Sjursen goes on to underline that ‘it is only by presenting clear definitions of what ‘normative power’ is, and consequently what it is not, that we can realistically hope to say something empirical about the argument’ (Sjursen 2006: 236). Adrian Hyde-Price offers a fierce (and widely-cited) realist critique of what he sees as the liberal-idealist notions of the EU as a ‘normative’ or ‘civilian’ power, which regard the EU as ‘a novel and uniquely benign entity in international politics’ (Hyde-Price 2006: 217). ‘Central to such liberal-idealist arguments is the claim that the apparent weakness of the Union as an international actor – its lack of coercive instruments and its consequent reliance on declaratory politics and “soft power” – in fact constitute the very sources of its strength’ (Hyde-Price 2006: 217). Hyde-Price argues instead that structural realist theory can shed better light on the emergence, development and nature of EU foreign and security policy co-operation.

This article is motivated by the fact that there are still too few post-colonial studies of Europe as a normative power. This is unfortunate since post-colonial theory is able to
bring new insights to the problematic representations of the EU as a normative power. Post-colonial contributions are, among other things, able to reveal the Eurocentrism and ‘civilizationalist’ hierarchies that are inherent in the EU’s claims to define ‘the new normal on the international scene’ (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013:284). Indeed, normative power Europe may be interpreted as “a sophisticated version of the “EU-centric” narrative, in which Europe’s unique transcendence of the state of nature, its atonement for intra-European warfare and the annihilation of the internal other, European Jewry, is achieved by shaping and exporting norms deemed to be truly universal” (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013:284; also see Manners 2011). As stated in one postcolonial critique of the NPE, it is “a Eurocentric discourse that reinvigorates an outdated European moral paternalism” (Staeger 2016: 981). The current article emphasizes the continued relevance of post-colonial interpretations of the EU as a normative power. Following Thomas Diez (2004; 2005), our postcolonial analysis focuses on the power that lies in the representation of the EU as a normative power, and specifically focusing on the representations of the past, and the tensions inherent in the representations of European exceptionalism and universalism. The next section specifies what this postcolonial approach looks like.

A Post-Colonial Approach to Normative Power Europe
Since Ian Manners first published his pioneering article on ‘Normative Power Europe’ in 2002, the concept has been the topic of vivid debate (cf. Diez 2004, 2005, 2013; Forsberg 2012; Hettne and Söderbaum 2005; Hyde-Price 2006; Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2006; Pace 2007; Rosamond 2005; Scheipers and Sicurelli 2007; Storey 2006; Whitman 2006). Yet, post-colonial interventions in the debate about NPE have remained rather scarce (some exceptions, Adler-Nissen and Gad 2013, 2014; Hansen and Jonsson 2012, 2014; Kinnvall 2016; Staeger 2016). This section defines our post-colonial approach, which focuses specifically on the power that lies in representations of Europe’s past and representations of Europe’s exceptionalism-universalism.

Post-colonialism can be understood in several different ways. Sharp (2009) proposes that we can distinguish between post-colonial approaches (with a hyphen) that primarily refer to the time period after colonialism, and postcolonial theorizing
(without a hyphen) that moves beyond the sole focus upon the political and economic impacts of colonial rule, towards an analysis that considers ‘the importance of the cultural products of colonialism, particularly the ways of knowing the world that emerged’ (Sharp 2009: 5). This production of knowledge implies a consideration of geopolitical dimensions that are in the present as much as in the past — hence, the present is linked to the past. In addition, problematizing the terminology of the ‘post’, for it running the risk of reinscribing a colonial temporal logic, Mignolo (2000) has further suggested using modernity/coloniality as mutually constitutive concepts for the analysis of how colonial relations operate in present tense, rather than as a legacy of a past deemed less desirable.

The post-colonial approach to Europe as a normative power advanced in this paper places emphasis on tracing the representations of the EU’s past and its proclaimed exceptionality. Our focus on representation finds inspiration in Thomas Diez’s work (2004; 2005) and his claim that we need to pay attention to the power that lies in the representation of the EU as a normative power. It is important to acknowledge that the debate has moved beyond a binary question: “is the EU a normative power?”. Diez correctly argues for a shift of focus “from a discussion of normative power as an empirical phenomenon to a second-order analysis of the power inherent in the representation of [NPE]“ (Diez 2005, 626). According to Diez, the success of this representation is not only ‘a precondition for other actors to agree to the norms set by the EU’ but also something that ‘constructs an identity of the EU against the image of others in the “outside world”’ (Diez 2005: 614). While the idea of ‘Europe’ is, of course, complex and multifaceted, what we will focus upon is a notion of Europe as unique in its universality – and therefore bearer of a responsibility towards the rest of the world. The study should by no means be read as an attempt to capture all aspects of normative power approaches, but rather as an attempt to point to certain problems and silences in contemporary scholarship that might open up for a deeper understanding of what it means to represent Europe as a normative power, focusing on two core elements: constructions of the past, and tensions between universality and exceptionalism.

In what follows, we make two key claims about the particular nature of NPE as a representation (focusing on NPE as it has co-created by academia and policy makers
since the early 2000s). First, we show that side-lining the constitutive role of the past in Europe’s present sustains the postcolonial drive of NPE. Second, we shed light on the tension between exceptionalism and universalism of NPE. These two concepts typically excluding each other, but NPE aspires to incorporate both.

(Mis)representations of the Past: Breaking with the Past

Manners and other proponents of NPE do not ignore Europe’s past. As Manners emphasized: “[i]t is worth acknowledging the impact of Europe’s colonial past. […] From this perspective Europe can be seen to be the exploiter of the world, with its relations being characterized by a combination of colonial legacy, predominance in international institutions, and continued exploitation through the forces of globalisation” (Manners 2000b: 182). Yet, Manners and other proponents of NPE argue that we must acknowledge that Europe has managed to break with its past. This is also the main official discourse coming from Brussels as well as the EU’s member states. Hence, according to this view, it is rather in spite of the historical context in which the ‘European project’ was formed, which the EU has been able to accelerate its ‘commitment to placing universal norms at the center of its relations’ (Manners 2002: 241).

NPE claims therefore a particular dissociation from Europe’s colonial past. The difference between the EU and historical empires as well as contemporary global powers trying to simply promote their own norms, Manners suggests, lies the EU being “created in a post-war historical environment which reviled the nationalisms that had led to barbarous war and genocide. Because of this the creation of Community institutions and policies took place in a context where Europeans were committed to ‘pooling their resources to preserve and strengthen peace and liberty’” (Manners, 2002: 240). This is a powerful (and persistent) representation of European integration as war-torn Europe which rose from the ashes and atrocities committed during World War II to form a Union based on the idea of peace and liberty for all. As such, the EU project represents both continuity with a European tradition of humanism, and discontinuity with the horrors immediately preceding it. We argue that NPE uses a particular and problematic construction of a past from which it falsely claims distance. The function
of ‘past as other’ is to lay out a “modernist linearity to know the ‘different’ and ‘inferior’ that violates ‘universal’ principles” (Staeger 2016, 986). Anchoring NPE in its historicity is not simply a ‘history of ideas’ undertaking, it is also a quintessentially postcolonial analytical strategy (Postel-Vinay 2008; Kuru 2015).

A postcolonial analysis turns our eyes to the exclusion of colonial histories in narratives of European integration and ‘Europe’ as a peace project. Indeed, a silence surrounds the colonies when the project of European integration is commonly represented today. For if the EU today is composed of countries with a colonial past, the European Communities was a creation in which colonial powers – and therefore the colonies themselves – indeed was part. The EU’s founding Treaty of Rome was written at a point in time when the signatory states – Belgium, Germany, France, Italy and the Netherlands – held over 20 colonies, most of them in Africa. Adding the countries that would later join to form the European Union, we can see that in 1957 they held over 80 colonies, the last one gaining its independence in 1984. While colonies where struggling, often violently, for independence, European integration was from metropolitan perspective seen as a possible means to safeguard the bonds between metropole and colony. The notion of ‘Eurafrica’ was the most powerful expression of this desire (Hansen and Jonsson 2015). After finalising the negotiations of the Rome Treaty in 1957, French Prime Minister Guy Mollet proudly proclaimed:

I would like to insist upon the unity of Europe: it is now a fact. A few days ago we jumped over the last hurdles that were on its way, and now an even broader unity is being born: EURAFRICA, a close association in which we will work together to promote progress, happiness and democracy in Africa (quoted in Hansen and Jonsson 2011:445).

The legitimacy of European colonial rule was based on a notion of Europe as bearer of a specific responsibility towards the world, the *mission civilisatrice* that burdened Europe with the task of reshaping the world in its own likeness. This mission also had an internal side, directed towards the civilizing and modernizing of population groups considered ‘backwards’. ‘Europeanness’ in this respect did not necessarily follow from dwelling in Europe, not even if one had done so for generations.
A postcolonial reading helps to reveal how the representation of Europe as the embodiment of certain (universal) norms, gaining its power to act in the world through these norms. This is a main line of thought in European modernity, and thus has a history considerably older than the current project of today’s EU. Dussel (1995) traces the genealogies of this European exceptionalism as far back as to early modern Christian expansion in the Americas. Dussel's point, interesting for our argument, is the ideological continuity between Christian narratives of salvation and secular narratives of civilizing/modernizing through the spread of universal values. By representing themselves precisely as breaking with (Catholic) barbarism of the past, secular colonial projects could rearticulate themselves as new embodiments of the universal. The same logics have been at play in Europe’s representation of the past throughout history.

The absence of postcolonial/decolonial theorizing about Europe as a normative power, attests to ‘just how effective the denial of Europe’s pre-world-war colonial past has been since the inception of the EU project’ (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013: 284). In fact:

Europeans have managed to create and fine-tune their Union over the past 50 years in a fascinating kind of ‘virgin birth’ – as if the new entity had nothing to do with the past of its most powerful Member States. In short, Eurocentrism stubbornly survived European imperialism (Ibid).

In an attempt to address this denial, our analysis emphasize the ideological continuity not only in the history of an exceptionalist notion of Europe, but also in the repeated discursive breaks with the past. By breaking with a past turned obsolete, ‘Europe’ can renew its mandate to act in the world as bearer and promoter of universal norms. The precondition here is the pastness of the past, as reaffirmed in official EU discourse and the proponents of NPE. The past has to be dead and buried. To paraphrase Derrida (2006: 9) on the presence of the ghostly: It is necessary to make sure that the past is really past. Let it stay there, and move no more!

In the case of the EU, the break with the past is performed through the reproduction of 1957 as a mythical birth moment taking place within Europe, rather than in and between European empires. This Europe then, is represented as something new – the
materialization of the dream of peace and democracy held by the founding fathers – separating colonial pasts form the project of European integration. As Bhambra (2013: 10) suggests:

The European project [...] now assigns all unbounded histories to the histories of individual states, and not to the history of Europe. Colonialism becomes the past property of individual national-states to be displaced by a new narrative of European integration free from the stain of colonialism. By erasing the colonial past, however, the postcolonial present of Europe is also disavowed.

One of our points, however, is that articulations of a normative responsibility towards the world are historically articulated on a European level as much as on a national. Several scholars, Manners included (cf. Manners 2013), have in recent years stated the need for further post-colonial scrutiny of NPE approaches. While welcoming this, we perceive it as problematic how such propositions have largely asked questions around how ‘past European failures and crimes (such as colonialism, nationalism, world wars, the holocaust and inequality) … are part of the normative power narrative’ (Manners 2006: 174), rather than engaging with the fact that the ‘new’ Europe was from the very beginning a colonial creation (Hansen and Jonsson 2011). That is: the fact that European integration was founded not on a colonial past – but on a colonial present.

If coloniality, as argued by among others Dussel (1995) and Mignolo (2000), is inseparable from European modernity and universalism, in the sense that modern ‘Europe’ was both materially and ideologically created through its (colonial) relation to the rest of the world, then colonialism cannot be easily understood as a ‘failure’ possible to separate from ‘good’ modernity. This, in turn has wide implications for the notion of the EU as a normative power. We can then understand colonialism (despite the phrasing of commitment to equal and just development in various policy agreements and documents) as an inherent feature of the European project. And, paraphrasing Manners’ proposition from 2002, this predisposes it to act accordingly in global politics.
Exceptionalism and universalism: squaring the circle of the ‘good guys’

Postcolonial studies has underscored the particular tension between exceptionalism and universalism inherent in European political thought and action (De 2002). Chakrabarty’s call to provincialise Europe is the most authoritative call to relegate European universal aspirations to a regional remit, while not ousting it entirely from analysis (Chakrabarty 2000). NPE as a foreign policy doctrine has equally been analysed through its constitutive tension between European exceptionalism and the purported universality of the same project. In particular, contributions have underscored the contradictions between NPE’s communitarian and cosmopolitan claims (Rosamond 2014; Parker and Rosamond 2013). While siding with these claims, this tension between exceptionalism and universalism gains increased relevance in a postcolonial perspective.

The difference between communitarian, cosmopolitan and cosmopolitical normative theory becomes important, particularly in the context of globalisation and neoliberalism (Manners 2013a). As Kinnvall has argued, there is a need to understand the ‘mulifaceted nature of globalisation […] in terms of a global-local nexus of dominance and resistance’ using postcolonial, poststructural political theory and political psychology (Kinnvall 2006b: 11–35; Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking 2010; Manners 2011a: 227). Thus ‘a communitarian emphasis on normative power as promoting European values raises concerns of neocolonial hegemony’, while ‘postcolonial theory and concerns for neocolonial practices must be explicit in attempts to understand how to judge and justify normative power’ (Manners 2011a: 245).

European exceptionalism has been a persuasive element of both public and academic debate around the EU’s role in the world today. Many of the official statements and proclamations released by the European Commission underline the exceptional normative underpinnings of the EU. For instance, according to the European Commission: ‘The EU is particularly active in promoting the human aspects of international relations, such as solidarity, human rights and democracy’ (European Commission (2004a, p. 1)). The Commission states that the exercise of these values and principles is in accordance with the principles upon which the EU itself is based, and that the Union needs to spread these norms around the world (European Commission,
There is a rather striking self-confidence within the EU regarding the importance of its own integration experiences as well as the positive role of the EU in the world. Another official document states that the EU’s Delegations serve the purpose of ‘taking both the idea and reality of European Union to a world hungry for its presence’ (European Commission, 2004b, p. 59).

The EU’s perceived exceptionalism was emphasised by the Head of the EU Delegation of one Asian country, as described in the interview referred to previously. In response to the claim that ‘we are the good guys’, the follow up question was if we should then understand ‘Europeans’ as ‘inherently good … compared to the rest of the world?’ Responding to this question, the Head of Delegation elaborates:

I think so. Yes, I think so. /…/ Whenever I give a speech, on any subject in this country, I always start by saying: /…/ the EU is the greatest peacemaker in the world. We have won the Nobel Peace Prize not for nothing. We may not have won the Nobel Prize for economics with the Eurozone crises [he laughs] but I am extremely proud of what the EU has done, is doing, and is trying to do. /…/ I really do believe that the EU is a force for good.

We posit that the EU’s normative sleight of hand that squares the circle between universalism and exceptionalism is its claim of being a “post-Westphalian polity”, thereby transcending the nation-state and its interest-based foreign policy rationale (Manners 2002, 240). Indeed, it is part of the official EU discourse to claim that its exceptionalism results from that ‘Community action is more neutral than action by the Member States, which have their own history and are bound by a specific legal system. Community solidarity and the Community’s integrated approach to cooperation are undoubtedly major assets.’ (European Commission 2000, p. 4). This posited exceptionalism rests in part also on NPE’s construction of the past, and it enables a universalist discourse about the EU’s foreign policy.

More specifically than a grand narrative about EU foreign policy, the universalism-exceptionalism concatenation of NPE enables the diffusion of the EU’s integration
experience. The EU has presented itself as a ‘natural’ and thus ‘universal’ point of reference for other regions and regional organizations. The EU tries to promote its own regional experience as the norm for region-building throughout the globe. Indeed, the EU is eagerly persuading other regions to follow its own example, which it sees as ‘a model for integration between countries in other regions of the world’ (European Commission 2004a, p 3).

For example, many policy documents postulates that the European model of integration is proclaimed as the most important reference model for virtually all regional initiatives in the world:

There are a number of lessons that can be drawn from the experience of regional integration in various parts of the world. Probably the most important lesson can be derived from the European experience, not only on account of its long history but also because, to a large extent, it can be considered as the only successful example of regional integration so far. (European Commission, 1995, p. 8).

In a similar fashion, the President of the European Commission (1999–2004) and former Italian Prime Minister, Romani Prodi also praises the EU’s exceptionalism and as well as its universal relevance:

Our European model of integration is the most developed in the world. Imperfect though it still is, it nevertheless works on a continental scale. Given the necessary institutional reforms, it should continue to work well after enlargement, and I believe we can make a convincing case that it would also work globally (Prodi quoted in Rosamond, 2005: 473).

Continuities and discontinuities in representations of European exceptionalism-universalism

NPE as productive power operates at the highly abstract and often quasi-mythological level. In this perspective, ideas about ‘good’ regional integration and normative goals of governance rather than self-interest are at the forefront. In 2003 with the European
Security Strategy, the EU was at a peak in self-confidence and fully embraced direct forms of enactment of NPE. As Nathalie Tocci, the lead author of the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS) writes: “In 2003, the European Union was full of confidence and hope. In 2003, we lived in an international liberal order in which the belief in an imminent End of History was widespread (Fukuyama 1992). We lived in a world in which US hegemony was still unchallenged and the broad conviction in Europe was that by “acting together, the European Union and the USA can be a formidable force for good in the world” (EUHR 2003:20). We lived in a world in which many countries were knocking at the EU’s door, and in which the EU as such was viewed as a model and source of inspiration by many across the globe.” (Tocci 2017, 51).

In 2016, the EUGS rhetorically does away with the primacy of norms over interest in favour of a combination of the two: “Our interests and values go hand in hand. We have an interest in promoting our values in the world. At the same time, our fundamental values are embedded in our interests” (Tocci 2017, 13). The EUGS thus argues that the EU’s norms are contained in a norms-interest compound. However, also the EUGS does not completely absolve the primacy of postcolonial NPE: “The point is rather that of saying that the EU should remove its rose-tinted glasses and pragmatically look at the world as it is, and not as would like to see it. The pragmatism comes in the diagnosis of the geopolitical predicament the EU finds itself in. […] However, the union should not fall into the trap of cultural relativism: EU pragmatism should be principled. While different pathways, recipes and models are to be embraced, international law and its underlying norms should be the benchmark of what is acceptable for the EU and what is not.” (Tocci 2017, 65). Over the course of about 15 years, the EU has thus evolved considerably in how it wishes to enact norms in its foreign policy. However, the substance of NPE as a representation of the EU remains intact and unchallenged. The postcolonial condition driving this representation is equally untouched. There is merely an attempt at removing the full primacy of norms over interests, but the genealogical dependence on NPE as it was conceived in the early 2000s remains entirely intact (even if there is a clear attempt to move towards less coercive and more diffuse forms of enactment of NPE).
Conclusion

For several decades the debate about the EU’s role in the world has been dominated by scholars and policy makers that view the EU as a normative power. From this perspective the EU is believed to deal with the external world in a more normative manner compared to ordinary great powers and nation-states.

This article proposes a postcolonial reading of how the EU is represented as normative power. The strength of the post-colonial analysis outlined in this paper lies in its ability to: (i) trace the (mis)representations of Europe’s past and that (post)colonialism is an inherent feature of the European project; and (ii) trace how EU officials as well as scholarly proponents of the Normative Power Europe (NPE) approach are representing an idea of the EU as the exceptionally ‘good guys’ with a universal relevance. The analysis reveals in particular the Othering, power, and Eurocentrism that lies in such representations.
References


Manners, I (2000)


