

# **‘We are the good guys!’ Postcolonial reflections on the European Union as a normative power**

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At the Delegation of European Union Commission in one of the Asian capitals, the Delegation official leans back in his chair: ‘So, are we going philosophical [now]?’ he asks in response to the question of how he views the European Union (EU) as a power and its role in the world today. Up until then the interview has largely revolved around the ongoing trade negotiations with the country in which he is placed. The question now posed is, agreed, less concrete but it is, nonetheless, highly relevant. The EU has made it an explicit trade policy objective to promote sustainable development through its external trade policy. The trade policy document ‘Global Europe: Competing in the world’, launched by the European Commission in 2006, states this with clarity:

As we pursue social justice and cohesion at home, we should also seek to promote our values, including social and environmental standards and cultural diversity, around the world (European Commission 2006: 5).

What does this tell us about the EU’s role in the world today? At the EU Delegation the answer is clear. It tells us, the Delegation official states: ‘That we [the EU] are the good guys.’ He continues:

We are the good guys. 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 I mean that is ... [waves his hands], these people go in and negotiate real trade deals [he emphasizes real], 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.<sup>1</sup>

The explanation of the EU as 'the good guys' prompts a number of questions. One being if we should then understand 'Europeans' as 'inherently good ... compared to the rest of the world?' Responding to this fairly provocative question, the Delegation officer elaborates:

I think so. Yes, I think so. /.../ I think our diversity is our strength and weakness at the same time. We have 28 member states, some of which are more hard-nosed than others, some of which are more protectionist than others, some are more free-traders than others /.../ It is our strength, because we can really be ecumenical, but it is also our weakness because it makes our negotiation position much more difficult. So, how do I see the role of the EU in the world? Whenever I give a speech, on any subject in this country, I always start by saying: Allow me to do some propaganda. I always start by saying that 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 may be naïve but I really do believe that the EU is a force for good.

The interview at this EU Delegation also raised questions regarding Europe's colonial past in the region – and how this influences (or not) contemporary relations between the EU and its Asian partners. The answers given to such questions reveal that while the colonial past is sometimes brought up (in relation to trust) between negotiating parties, it is not a prominent issue for the EU. The EU Delegation head states: 'Because the past is the past. We have

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<sup>1</sup> Removed from this citation (marked with /.../ are the specificities that could reveal the particular trade agreement negotiation at hand.

turned the page, right?' When asked to elaborate, he responds:

It's not Europe versus the world or the former colonial masters versus the world. It's the West versus the world. It's the rich white West versus the world, regardless of colonialism and the colonial past. The superiority complex that we have and the inferiority complex that they have is just a fact of life.

While the above only serve as one example of how EU officials view the role of the EU in its external relations, the message conveyed regarding European *exceptionalism* has been a persuasive element of both public and academic debate around the EU's role in the world today. Throughout this chapter we trace the historical representation of European exceptionalism, directing particular attention towards Ian Manners's notion of Europe as a 'normative power' (Manners 2002, 2006a, 2006b, 2011, 2013). The focus here upon *representation* borrows inspiration from Thomas Diez (2004, 2005) and his suggestion that we need to pay attention to *the power that lies in the representation of the EU as a normative power*. 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 thus not 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*.

### **Approaching 'Europe' as a Normative Power**

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). While Manners have developed the concept in numerous articles (Manners, 2006a, 2006b, 2011, 2013), its essential elements remain more or less the same; Europe's normative power does not rest on military nor purely economic might, but rather upon 'ideo-

logical 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 its view not shaped by what it does or says – but rather by 'what it is' (Ibid: 252). The fact that the EU is constructed on a normative basis (i.e. upon democracy, rule of law, social justice and international human rights norms) therefore predisposes it to act in a normative way in world politics (Ibid). 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).

While the historical context in which the 'European project' was formed has been argued to accelerate the EU's 'commitment to placing universal norms at the center of its relations' (Manners 2002: 241), postcolonial interventions in the normative power debates have remained remarkably scarce (for a notable exception see Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013)). In the following paper we therefore hope to contribute to address this lack.

Post(-)colonialism can be understood in several different ways. Sharp (2009) proposes that we can think about this in terms of 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, thus, has geopolitical dimensions that are in the present as much as in 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 the present tense, rather than as a legacy of a past deemed less desirable.

### **Genealogies of the 'European Project'**

In the motivation of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee 2012, it is stated that 'with successive enlargement, the Union has continued to spread peace and democracy on the continent, by taking in new member-states.' Europe, so it seems, in itself represents certain values, and the EU is the present embodiment of this ideal Europe. Consequently, the enlargement of the Union is understood as an expansion of what the EU per definition is: peace and democracy, grounded in the historical moment of birth of the EU project. Also

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in academic discussions of normative power, the role of the EU as a 'force for peace and well-being' frequently takes center stage (Diez 2005: 620). The difference between the EU and historical empires as well as contemporary global powers trying to simply promote their own norms, Manners (2002: 240) suggests, derives from that:

The EU was 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'.

This is a powerful (and persistent) representation of the European Communities/Union in EU studies (and beyond): the 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. Looking for similar representations in contexts of cultural and intellectual debate, we find them given new urgency as response to crisis and unrest. If the EU has successfully promoted itself as an embodiment of 'Europe', the Eurozone crisis turn into not only a European crisis in the sense of it taking place in Europe; it is a crisis *for* Europe. This perspective was powerfully articulated in a manifesto published in a number of European newspaper in January 2013, and signed by several prominent intellectuals, among them Bernard-Henri Lévy, Umberto Eco, Julia Kristeva, Salman Rushdie and Antonio Lobo Antunes. The manifesto is a desperate plea for the very *belief* in Europe as a countermeasure to current turbulence:

Europe [...] is dying, Europe as an idea. Europe as a dream, a project, a plan. The Europe that was celebrated by Edmund Husserl [...] in Vienna shortly prior to the Nazi disaster. Europe as will and representation, as vision and place for construction, the Europe that our parents created, that became a new idea which brought an until then unknown peace, prosperity and democracy for the peoples after the war (Lévy et. al. 2013).

This plea must be put in context to the hauntings of National Socialism evoked by the entering in the Greek Parliament of the Golden Dawn. We should, however, be attentive to how the text performs a break between a European

project created by ‘our parents’ on the one hand, and the terrors of the ‘Nazi disaster’ on the other. Fascism appears as a modern variation of what *media tempestas* became in renaissance imagination (see Mignolo 2002: 940); an exception of history, from which a true Europe now need to be reborn.

In this narrative, in which fascism turns into a contradiction to Europe and European integration a response to fascism, colonial histories of EU member states are also occluded. Moving back a decade to perhaps more optimistic times, we might look at the reports from the Prague Castle Conferences in the early 2000s, jointly organized by Tony Blair’s London-based think-tank Foreign Policy Centre and the Prague-based Institute for International Relations. While the 2001 conference stated that ‘Europe’s founding fathers had a vision of peace, prosperity and democracy – which against the odds they achieved’, the 2003 conference was held under the heading: *Can Europe be a Force for Good in the World?* One of the main concerns this year was the spreading of European ideas and values:

[...] the question of what it is to be ‘European’ may become open to new answers. Participants [in the conference] foresaw a period in which identity is defined less by ethnic or geographical factors than commitment to certain values, rising the possibility of elites outside Europe becoming more ‘European’ than some of the minority populations within it. [...] Europe must, therefore, ask how it can manage and direct the spread of its ideas (British Council 2004: 13).

Now, from a historical perspective, the answers hinted in the text are far from new. Rather, they echo answers given to colonial *évolués* during the 19th and the 20th centuries, as well as questions on the belonging of and the need to civilize certain populations within Europe – be it Roma, Saami, peasant or working class, to mention a few (Lorenzoni 2008). Producing a category of non-European Europeans, the text thus turns certain kind of integration issues (or rather, segregation issues) into a question of the ‘management and direction of ideas’.

By the time of the conferences, the Czech Republic was negotiating its own entry into the European Union. Referring to ‘Europe’s founding fathers’ the 2001 conference identifies the EU with ‘Europe’ and places the Czech Republic as still outside but about to join Europe. European states can, so it seems, revive their ‘Europeanness’ by membership in the Union.

Let us, for a moment, turn back to the exclusion of colonial histories

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in narratives of 'Europe' as a peace project. While the Czech Republic was outside the new Europe when it was founded, what scholarly work has only recently begun to take seriously into account are that whole regions not conceived of as 'European' were nonetheless within. Let us listen to the words of French Prime Minister Guy Mollet, who in 1957, after the conclusion of the Rome Treaty negotiations, stated:

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).

In 1957 France was still a major colonial power and, not to forget, fighting a war in order to keep Algeria as a French *département*. Following the participation of colonial troops in WWII, and the deception in the colonies when confronted with the refusal of the metropolises to recognize claims for independence, the 1950s was a period of colonial unrest and uprising. No project of European integration could possibly ignore the question of colonial rule. The Treaty of Rome, rephrasing this questions into terms of partnership, consequently confirms 'the solidarity which binds Europe and the overseas countries and desiring to ensure the development of their prosperity, in accordance with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations' (Preamble of the Treaty of Rome). This 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.

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 (a pastness that can, however, be disputed), the European Communities was a creation in which colonial powers – and therefore the colonies themselves – indeed was part. While colonies were 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).

The legitimacy of European colonial rule was based on a notion of Eu-

rope 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. This is the very same conditioned Europe evoked not only by the Prague Castle Conference, but also by Eco et. al. when they refer to Husserl’s Vienna lecture. The lecture was held in 1935, at the eve of the Nazi terrors, and later published as *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man*. After stating that while the US in a ‘spiritual sense’ belongs to Europe, ‘Eskimos, Indians or Gypsies’ do not, Husserl says:

[In Europe] lies something unique, which all other human groups, too, feel with regard to us, something that apart from all considerations of expediency, becomes a motivation for them [...] constantly to Europeanize themselves, whereas we, if we understand ourselves properly, will never, for example Indianize ourselves (Husserl 1965: 169).

The desire of the Other to become the Same is a central figure in the legitimating narratives of European colonial rule; the need for the Other to become the Same, the only hope for the Other being in the possibility of becoming the Same. Europe, by embodying this sameness, is therefore unique in its universality. In another context, of another European – as well as colonial – war, English novelist D. H. Lawrence writes in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell in 1916:

I become more and more surprised to see how far higher, in reality, our European civilisations stand, than the East, Indian and Persian, ever dreamed of. [...] The East is *marvellously* interesting for tracing our steps *back*. But for going forward, it is nothing. All it can hope for is to be fertilised by Europe, so that it can start on a new phase (Lawrence 2002:608, italics in original).

What is remarkable with this celebration, is that it is written in the middle of WWI. However critical Lawrence was of militarism, the war did not shake his firm belief in the universal character of European civilization. The East, in its particularity, has a value as a past. But with the unfolding of the universal present, identified with Europe, it loses all strength.

Through European intellectual history, the inquiries as to what it is that

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makes Europe uniquely universal, runs as one of the strongest themes. In his 1905 study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* Max Weber, with sensitivity to time and place, addresses European exceptionalism not only as given, but also as a question of origin and point of view of the scholar. The introduction reads:

A product of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having *universal* significance and value (Weber 1974:13).

Weber thus links the urge to ask the question about the origin of the scholar ('a product of modern European civilization'), and hints to the inevitableness of selective interpretations of history ('as we like to think'). However, the text itself, by accepting the premises relativized in the introduction, immediately closes the window previously opened, and reaffirms the universality of Europe – and America as extension thereof. We can regard this as symptomatic. Indeed, Weber is writing not only of colonial America, but also in the heydays of European imperialism. What is occluded by the closure performed in his text is the indispensable relation between claims to universality and military power (cf. Chakrabarty 2000). The power of Europe to *successfully* represent itself as universal then becomes an enigma. Weber seeks his solutions not in geopolitical but in internal cultural factors; rationalities and values represented as specifically European.

Such an idealization of history had already decades before Weber's study been powerfully performed by Hegel, for whom military enterprise (such as Napoleon's war of expansion) is transformed into a mere function of a Universal Spirit, creating history by movement in space and time. In his *Philosophy of History* from 1831 Hegel writes:

The world is divided into *Old* ad *New*; the name of *New* having originated in the fact that America and Australia have only lately become known to us. But these parts of the world are not only relatively new, but intrinsically so in respect of their entire physical and psychical constitution. [---] The history of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History. [...] The History of the World is the discipline

of the uncontrolled natural will, bringing it into obedience to a Universal principle and conferring subjective freedom (Hegel 1861:84, 109-110, italics in original).

The connection between subsumption into the universal – represented by Europe – and freedom, is as clear as it can be. Looking at another passage, now from Hegel's earlier *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1817), he in interesting ways elaborates on the specificity of the European mind:

... the European mind opposes the world to itself, makes itself free of it, but in turn annuls this opposition, takes its other, the manifold, back into itself, into its unitary nature. In Europe, therefore, there prevails this infinite thirst for knowledge which is alien to other races (Hegel 2000: 43).

The purpose of these examples is not to construct an artificial identity between such diverse writers and thinkers such as Hegel, Weber and Lawrence. What we wish to show is how the representation of Europe as the embodiment of certain (universal) norms, gaining its power to act in the world through these norms, is a main line of thought in European modernity, and thus has a history considerably older than the current project of European integration. Dussel (1995) traces the genealogies of this European exceptionalism as far back as to early modern Christian expansion in the Americas. The dialectical operation of the mind described by Hegel, Dussel reads as a secular rearticulation of how the modern 'I' operates by subsuming the Other in the category of the Same. The year of 1492 is for Dussel a birth moment for this modern 'I' that defines itself as conqueror, distancing itself from the world in order to be able to take possession of it. In early modern times, the *I-conqueror* is articulated most strongly in the Spanish expansion westward, made sense of as an expansion of the Christian realm, and soon also as the 'discovery' of a 'new' world to be transformed into Christian likeness. Expansive universalism implies a negation of the alterity of the Other, reducing the Other to a non-fulfilled variation of the universal Same.

In modern post-Enlightenment times, the subsumption of the Other as a non-fulfilled Same, operates through what Fabian (2002) has termed a 'denial of coevalness', that is, the placing of the Other in another time than the one inhabited by the modern subject (as in civilized vs. primitive, modern vs. traditional etc). 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. Two things are at stake here. Firstly, the constitutive role of colonial expansion in the creation of 'Europe', understood not only as a geopolitical entity, but also, to speak with Eco et. al., as 'will and representation'. And secondly, the very pastness of the past.

### **Concluding Reflections on the Implications for Normative Power Europe Approaches**

The absence of postcolonial/decolonial theorization in normative power Europe approaches, according to Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013: 284), attests to 'just how effective the denial of Europe's pre-world-war colonial past has been since the inception of the EU project'. 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, we have shown 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 by the EU Delegation official in the interview that opened this article. 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 from the project of European integration. As Bhabra (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.

As shown above, however, 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 postcolonial scrutiny of normative power Europe 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. Provocatively phrased, 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.

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