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The graduation of EU development studies: towards a post-colonial turn?

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ABSTRACT

This conclusion reflects on the contributions to this volume from a post-colonial perspective. Although the colonial origins of EU development policy and its continuing relevance are generally assumed, the implications of this are often underexposed. After presenting the “post-colonial challenge” for the study of EU development and international partnership policies, I introduce and apply the decentring framework as proposed by Fisher-Onar and Nicolaidis (2021). Within each of the three steps in this model – provincialization, engagement, and reconstruction – I clarify what it implies for EU development studies, then link it to critiques of existing literature, including contributions in this volume, and indicate how authors point at some promising avenues forward. Finally, I argue that further research on the EU’s role towards the Global South should also account for injustices and alternatives *within* Europe.

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From development to partnerships?

It is a truism to say that the European Union (EU) is confronted with multiple crises. However, development cooperation is arguably even more existentially challenged than any other EU policy domain. This is because the core assumption that “development” should be advanced through aid to “developing countries” is increasingly contested by policy-makers, activists, observers and researchers inside and outside the EU. Post-development and decolonization debates seem to be gaining ground. In apparent moves to recognize this, the new European Commission headed by Ursula Von der Leyen (2019–2024) has appointed a Commissioner for International Partnerships (instead of International Cooperation and Development) and accordingly also its administration has been relabelled into the Directorate-General for International Partnerships.

As indicated by the editors of this volume, partnership is indeed the new “buzzword” (Steingass, Carbone, & Winand, 2021). However, contributors to this volume also make clear that the emphasis on “partnership” is not new to EU development policy and that serious questions can be asked about its meaning in an asymmetric power context (e.g. Dimier, 2021; Saltnes & Steingass, 2021; see also Holden, 2005; Langan, 2015; Ravenhill,

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1985). More than signalling effective paradigm change, the partnership illustrates the tensions and ambiguities with which development studies and practices are confronted (Delputte & Orbie, 2020a). Meanwhile, it remains uncertain whether it will effectively advance the EU's contribution to fostering global justice and decolonization.

In these concluding reflections, I aim to contribute to such a problematization by engaging with calls for a post-colonial turn in EU studies. In doing so, I build on the research goal as formulated in the introduction to this volume, namely on how EU development policy has adapted to meet the changing requirements of international development, while also providing an alternative perspective on the different contributions. Although the colonial origins of EU development policy and its continuing relevance are generally assumed, the implications of this are often underexposed.

What is a post-colonial perspective and why is it critical for foreign aid and development policy? Despite significant diversity, authors and activists typically stress the continuation of colonial logics. Development aid reinforces these logics, for instance by legitimizing interventions, consolidating dependencies, and inhibiting systemic change. Instead, there is a need for system change in terms of rebalanced power relations. While post-colonial literature theorizes the continuing material, ideological and epistemological power structures between the Global North and the Global South, post-development perspectives focus on why this makes the “development project” problematic and what the “pluriverse” of alternatives would look like.

These conclusions are structured as follows. In the next section, I present the “post-colonial challenge” for the field of EU development studies. In this context, the decentring framework of Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis (2021) is introduced. The three subsequent sections follow the respective steps of this model. Under each step I start by clarifying what it could imply for EU development studies, then link it to critiques of existing literature, including research in this volume, and finally indicate how authors point at some promising avenues forward. Finally, I argue that further research on the EU's role towards the Global South should also account for injustices and alternatives within Europe.

Embracing the post-colonial challenge

Over the past decades, quite an impressive amount of scholarship has dealt with the colonial entanglements of the “European project” (e.g. Adler-Nissen & Gad, 2013; Behr & Stivachtis, 2016; Bhambra, 2016; Chakrabarty 2000; Dimitrova & Kramsch, 2017; Fisher-Onar & Nicolaïdis, 2013; Garavine, 2012; Kinnvall, 2021; Ponzanesi & Colpani, 2015; Rodney, 1972). Oddly enough, however, cross-fertilization between this literature and the discipline of EU development studies has been relatively modest (for exceptions, see e.g. Chaban and Elgström, 2021; Haastrup, 2020; Hansen & Jonsson, 2014; Karagianis, 2004; Langan, 2020; Langan & Price, 2020; Musliu, 2014; Nessel, 2021; Rutazibwa, 2010; Sebhatu, 2020; Staeger, 2016; Whiteman, 2012). As stated by Sebhatu, “studies that discuss and analyse Africa–EU relations from a postcolonial perspective or through postcolonial approaches are hard to come by” (p. 38). Also in this volume, references to key authors who have worked on the colonial state of Europe, or engagement with the canon of post-colonial studies, such as N’Krumah, Fanon, Said, Spivak, Mignolo, are nearly absent.

Over the past two decades, EU development studies has established itself as a well-recognized sub-field in EU studies. Multiple books, volumes, handbook chapters, panels and sections at conferences have been organized. Now that EU development studies has become a mature field of scholarship – using development jargon, we might say that it has “graduated” – there is a risk of inbreeding and insulation. Combined with existential challenges on the “development” project, it therefore seems all the more appropriate to embrace the post-colonial challenge.

The contributions in this volume show the pitfalls and promises of such an exercise. They illustrate problematic biases that may emerge when ignoring the post-colonial challenge, while at the same time also showing the relevance of studying such an important policy field and the directions in which this could be stretched further. In the introduction, the editors have already aptly and amply stressed the diversity and complementarity of the authors’ contributions. Together, the contributions indeed witness the conceptual and empirical richness of the field of EU development studies. Hence the purpose of my concluding reflections is not to detract from the scientific relevance of the individual contributions; instead, I aim to make a small contribution in reflecting on what the post-colonial turn could entail. Inevitably, this involves a sympathetic critique of my colleagues’ work and not least my own.

For this purpose, I loosely follow the decentring agenda as proposed by Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis (2021) by distinguishing between three steps: “provincializing” EU policies on development and international partnerships, “engaging” with others’ views in this regard, and “reconstructing” EU policies. Although the Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis framework is not the only one and sits on the shoulders of a rich scholarly work, I use it here because it enables a pragmatic structure for the analysis. Nonetheless, I have adapted it for the purpose of discussing EU development policy and my analysis has also been inspired by other post-colonial and post-development thinkers.

Provincializing EU actorness

Provincializing implies the problematization of the EU as a development actor by having attention for colonial continuities. This has at least two aspects: a critique of the “EU” and of its “development mission”. It implies that the “values versus interests” distinction is transcended by highlighting underlying paradigms.

Unsurprisingly, much of the EU development policy literature has implicitly or explicitly focused on EU actorness. Whether or not scholars engage explicitly with the conceptual frameworks around actorness that have been refined multiple times since Sjöstedt’s model in the 1970s (Sjöstedt, 1977; see Carbone, 2021a in this issue), there is a tendency to focus primarily on questions of power, competences, institutions and coherence. Similarly, there has been much attention to the issue of Europeanization (e.g. Lightfoot & Szent-Iványi, 2014; Orbie & Carbone, 2016) and European coordination (e.g. Bodenstein, Faust, & Furness, 2016). The most recent manifestation of the EU’s “coordination fetish” (Delputte & Orbie, 2020b) has taken shape into the “Team Europe” approach since Covid-19 (Burni et al., 2021b). “External” factors such as the growing rise of China and “assertiveness” or “agency” of African governments are then indeed considered as external: not core to the analysis but rather side factors that may impact the EU’s actorness.

Given the disciplinary embedding in EU studies, the EU institutions' status as major donors as well as the member states' century-long colonial legacies, it is all the more appropriate to study how and why the EU deals with the development project. Moreover, if we would like to engage in a post-colonial approach, we do need a thorough understanding of the nuts and bolts of this policy field. For instance, we have to gain insight into the (evolving) European Parliament power (e.g. Burni, Erforth, & Keijzer, 2021a) in order to be able to contextualize its positions vis-à-vis the Global South, and it is useful to know how the EU behaves in multilateral fora (e.g. Carbone, 2021a) in order to evaluate power dynamics.

It is trickier, however, when the EU development studies literature as a whole displays insufficient engagement with non-European voices, as explained in the next section, and pays limited attention to the colonial roots of the EU development project. Uncritical accounts of the EU's role vis-à-vis the Global South may indeed (unintentionally) serve to further legitimize the EU's current policies and practices.

The notion of "uncritical" should be further explained here. Interestingly, there is no lack of studies that criticize EU development policy and EU foreign policy more broadly. Quite the contrary, much work has focused on how the EU's development objectives are being thwarted by other, less normative policy goals. The "values-versus-interests" divide arguably constitutes the core of the literature. Many authors have highlighted how material interests (e.g. migration and security concerns; access to energy and commodities), ideological biases (e.g. neoliberal beliefs, securitization frames), and institutional intricacies (e.g. shared competences with member states; the European External Action Service) have come to overshadow the true and original purposes of EU development policy. As also stated by the editors, we are recently witnessing "an increasing instrumentalization of foreign aid" (Steingass et al., 2021).

Yet this values-versus-interests framing is problematic in and of itself, as it prevents us from engaging in a more profound post-colonial critique. Rutazibwa (2013) criticizes such "binary and antagonistic understanding" and states that "western ethical foreign policy cannot be simply captured in a binary characterization of the good (norms) or the bad (interests) interests" (p. 84). Instead of analyzing colonial continuities – for instance, by going back to the racist views of Coudenhove-Kalergi, the high appearance of Africa on the agenda of the Council of Europe in its early years, the European Economic Community's ambition to coordinate colonial exploitation of Africa, subsequent neocolonialism under Yaoundé and Lomé (Galtung, 2021; Hansen & Jonsson, 2014) – the dominant focus is on the pendulum between values-versus-interests. This is not to say that the interplay between interests and values is irrelevant, and various scholars have posited sophisticated analysis from this perspective (e.g. Beringer, Maier, & Thiel, 2019; Olivé & Pérez, 2020). However, a dominant focus on the alleged "values-versus-interests" dichotomy carries the risk that the underlying colonial project is ignored or sidelined. In other words, *paradigmatic continuities* remain unquestioned while all attention goes to the more superficial level of *changing policy ideas* (Delputte & Orbie, 2020a). To state it differently, we should not only look at the "institutional path dependence" that is mentioned by the editors (Steingass et al., 2021) but also at a deeper colonial path dependence that continues to affect our action and thinking.

There is also often a temporal dimension to this framing. Literature sometimes exhibits an assumption that EU development policy used to be good and pure in the old days

but has then gradually worsened and became contaminated by non-development considerations. For instance, the Lomé era has been called a “model” for North–South relations (e.g. Arts & Dickson, 2004), and the early 2000s have been described as a golden era or “new season” for the EU’s commitment to aid effectiveness (e.g. Carbone, 2008a). While such accounts are always more nuanced and complicated, the key message that is often conveyed reads that EU development policy is (and was) intrinsically a normative project, but that it (increasingly) risks becoming subordinated to less-normative agendas (e.g. Orbie, 2012). This framing constitutes another manifestation of the “virgin birth” myth which suggests that the European Economic Community was conceived in 1957 as a neutral actor that is free from member states’ colonial pasts (Fisher-Onar & Nicolaïdis, 2013, p. 284).

In this volume, Hadfield and Lightfoot (2021) most explicitly endorse this narrative by distinguishing between an “era” where the EU had a “historic focus on poverty reduction” and subsequent “seminal changes” that entailed “private sector foreign direct investment interests, as well as overtly security-driven dynamics connected to enhanced control over borders, migration, and energy”. They find that “development policy becomes increasingly about EU interests and less about the partner countries’ long-term development needs”, identifying a shift around the new millennium. Furthermore, they rightly stress that the EU has more and more focused on “nexuses” between development policy and other policies such as migration and environment. While this observation is correct at the level of policy ideas, one could also add that there has been a meta-nexus between EU development policy and neocolonialism that has been underestimated. In their overview of EU–Latin America relations, Ayuso and Gratius (2021) also identify a shift since 9/11 whereby the EU lost its profile of a “soft” and “generous” civilian power and became more concerned with security interests; although since 2016/2017 the EU again adopts a more idealist, normative and de-securitized approach. Similarly (Carbone 2021a), distinguishes between an exceptional phase in the early 2000s when the EU attempted to “enhance the quality of aid” versus “a stronger emphasis on the promotion of its economic and political interests” since the mid-2010s. In relation to the European Commission’s position at the Busan conference, he discerns “a philosophical shift: aid was seen as a tool for private sector development and the pursuit of EU interests, rather than an instrument to reduce poverty and support development goals”. Admittedly, all these authors mostly refer to changes in “frames” and “narratives”, and not necessarily in policy practice; however, there is arguably an implicit assumption that this reflects the reality of policy-making, and reflections on enduring colonial logics are absent.

Nonetheless, different contributions to this volume also make it clear that the EU’s pursuit of development in the 1970s or the 2000s was less lofty than it might appear. For instance, during the exact same period when the EU was playing the moral high ground on development finance and aid effectiveness, it was also ardently pursuing far-reaching Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with the former colonies of the ACP Group. As will be shown below, the EPA agenda strongly problematizes the EU’s development-friendly image. As argued by Langan and Price (2021) with reference to the interim EPA signed with Ghana and the poultry sector, “premature trade liberalization can undermine agricultural livelihoods”. In the same vein, Dimier (2021) debunks the caricature of a development-friendly EEC during the 1970s. She does that based on

original empirical material, namely the theatrical play of the “metro-circulaire ou l’anti-FED”. This striking piece of evidence illustrates the cynical and, indeed, colonial attitude of European Commission officials responsible for development. An analysis of changes at the level of policy ideas could focus on the European Commission’s changes from “neutrality” towards (selective) “political conditionality” towards the end of the 1970s, as briefly discussed by Dimier towards the end of her contribution. However, the key take-away from her historical account is how even long after formal decolonization (French) colonial interests continued to be deeply interwoven with EEC aid policies.

In a more overtly post-colonial approach, Haastrup, Duggan, and Mah (2021) stress that the issue is not just one of “power asymmetry”, which has been widely acknowledged in the literature (although the power asymmetry discourse may also reproduce “epistemic violence”, see Sebhatu, 2020, p. 45), but also and more importantly the “coloniality of power”. By using the concept of “ontological (in)security”, they manage to transcend the values-versus-interests divide. Normative Power Europe (NPE) is not opposed to an interest-based Europe: it is part and parcel of a Europe that seeks to find and prolong a “sense of self”. Faced with significant challenges such as the migration “crisis”, competition with China, and growing African agency, the EU’s response has been to try and strengthen its ontological security through a continued exercise of a coloniality of power. The authors do not frame this as a deviation from previous and pure development practices, but instead argue that this constitutes “more of the same”. Quoting Irish President Michael Higgins, they conclude that the EU should abandon “amnesia as to the brutal colonization of previous times”, which indeed is core to the stage of provincialization.

Engaging with marginalized voices

Engagement implies taking into account the “marginalized” that are the supposed “beneficiaries” of EU development policies. This stage has at least three aspects. First, it means that there is attention to the EU’s actual impact, directly through development policy but also through other channels, on the good life and emancipation of the subaltern. Second, it involves listening to non-European views and experiences. Their voices should not be considered as contextual or explanatory for the EU’s actorness, but are indeed core to the analysis. Third, it concerns attention to epistemic diversity whereby local (“indigenous”) knowledges are taken into account and “western” scientific notions are not uncritically adopted. The latter includes a cautious approach towards technocratic and seemingly “objective” jargon from the donor community, such as “aid effectiveness”, “graduation”, and the very concept of “developing”.

While much of the literature addresses the political drivers behind and institutional intricacies around EU development policies, there is surprisingly little detailed analysis of the actual impact on the life of people and groups in the Global South. This reflects wider observations on EU-centrism in literature on EU foreign policy (Keuleers, Fonck, & Keukeleire, 2016). In this volume, Carbone (2021a) provides a useful and sophisticated definition of external impact, involving goal achievement, problem-solving capacity and negotiation process. However, as with many studies on this subject, his contribution does not directly tackle the issue of “development” impact on the ground. Impact is mainly conceived in terms of “inside-out” achievement, whereas a decentring

perspective would also look at the EU's legitimacy as viewed from local populations ("outside-in" approach; see Keuleers et al., 2016). Burni et al. (2021a) make a detailed analysis of the European Parliament's impact in negotiations on the new financing mechanism, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). Interestingly, they mention the establishment of a monthly "geopolitical dialogue" between the EP and the Commission, which apparently constitutes a new inter-institutional coordination platform in Brussels, and one that risks reinforcing the dynamic mentioned by Saltnes and Steingass (2021) that "EU-centred institutional competition (...) comes with a lack of attention for external participation" (see Carbone, 2008b, for a similar point on European coordination and ownership in EU–Africa relations). The authors suggest three directions for further research, but these do not include analysis of impact on the Global South or inclusion of subaltern voices. There is also no mentioning of the Joint Parliamentary Assembly (JPA) or other inter-parliamentary groups that may or may not have voiced relevant concerns on this topic (see e.g. Delputte & Williams, 2016).

An important caveat on the need for studying actual impact must be mentioned here: post-colonial and post-development approaches would be wary about the kind of experimental, randomized control trial researches that have been unleashed on populations in so-called developing countries, an approach that has been celebrated through the 2019 Nobel Prize in Economics that was awarded to Esther Duflo, Abhijit Banarjee and Michael Kremer (for critiques, see e.g. Kvangraven, 2020; Sanjay, 2012). Instead, focus should be on slow science, historical contextualization, and engagement with local communities and lived experiences.

This links with the second aspect, namely the taking into account of "non-European" voices. There is a tendency in some work (not least my own) to suffusing a vernacular flavour to research findings by referring to "the field" or "the ground" while in fact most of the interviewees are European diplomats and practitioners (e.g. Orbie, Delputte, Williams, Steurs, & Verschaeve, 2017). Rather than engaging with Europeans outside EU borders, the real challenge would be to search for and engage with the "pluriverse" of views from people and groups who tend to be silenced (Kothari, Salleh, Escobar, Demaria, & Acosta, 2019). In existing literature, several studies have taken steps in this direction, mostly by examining the preferences of African governments, either directly through their negotiations with the EU (e.g. Hackenesch, 2015), or indirectly through regional institutions such as the African Union (AU) (e.g. Carbone, 2018), the group of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (ACP) (e.g. Carbone, 2021b; Hurt, 2020), or the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (e.g. Murray-Evans, 2015) and other regional institutions in Africa (e.g. Fioramonti & Mattheis, 2016). A number of studies have also focused on contestation and politicization within so-called beneficiary states against EU development policies, for instance against the EPAs in West-Africa (Igechi, 2021; Plank, Keijzer, & Niemann, 2021) or against LGBTI rights promotion in Uganda (Saltnes & Thiel, 2021).

In this issue, Carbone (2021a) and Winand (2021) make extensive use of interviews of European and non-European actors, although it seems that the large majority of interviewees work at EU-related institutions. Saltnes and Steingass (2021) more actively engage with non-European perspectives by carefully analyzing the preferences of the ACP "partner" countries, for instance by scrutinizing their official mandate for the post-

Cotonou negotiations with the EU. Together with a refined and refreshing conceptualization of the “partnership” concept, this engagement allows them to more carefully assess underlying tensions between the EU and the ACP.

While being a welcome step, the focus on states and governments in Africa would still be insufficient to fully engage with the alleged beneficiaries of development and international partnership policies, which are indeed not political elites but individuals and groups in the Global South. In her historical analysis of the client-based relationship between the EU and the ACP, Dimier (2021) makes a relevant distinction between “the African elite” and the “African people”. Indeed, Galtung (1973) had already outlined in the early 1970s that there were clear consistencies in preferences between elites in Europe and in so-called developing countries. Similarly, Fanon wrote about the role of the “national bourgeoisie” (Fanon, 1963, pp. 152–153). More recently, Langan and Price (2015) mention the “extraversion” of “predatory elites” in relation to EPAs. Also in this volume, these latter authors take the engagement one step further and offer a “much needed local perspective” by interviewing forty-three poultry farmers in Ghana about how they perceive the consequences of trade liberalization on migration flows. They conclude by stating that fieldwork engagement helps “to challenge donors” simplistic narratives of ‘pro-poor’ and “win-win” trade and development ties with former colonies” (Langan & Price, 2021).

This account goes some way forward in terms of exploring alternative knowledges. Nonetheless, attention for epistemic diversity remains challenging. It may also require stronger connections with scholars and activists from the Global South, which may involve uncomfortable steps outside the comfort zone of one’s disciplinary boundaries, as we also experienced with another volume on politicization of EU development policy (Hackenesch, Bergmann, & Orbie, 2021). Most research projects on EU development policy fail to involve scholars from the Global South and are largely dominated by European scholars (notable exceptions are Kotsopoulos & Mattheis, 2019; Vérez, 2019). Furthermore, as also witnessed in this volume, reference lists rarely display academic work from colleagues based in the Global South. These deficiencies warrant further reflection, not only on how to address them in future research but also on how they may bias our findings.

What may be easier to achieve, is trying to not uncritically adopt prevailing development jargon and donor discourses. Most contributions to this volume do not problematize the conceptual enterprise of doing “development” policy. Dimier’s (2021) archive analysis of the theatre play reveals how Jacques Ferrandi, a high-level European Commission bureaucrat and former French official who was in charge of the European Development Fund (EDF), played his own character by saying about a project that was “not justified”: “in two days, I want a full technical file with objective arguments showing that this project is good” (Dimier, 2021). Such findings would be a perfect entry for a discussion on continuing tensions between “objective” knowledge produced by scholars, think-tanks and consultants, and how these relate to EU policy-making processes in Brussels; however, the author does not elaborate on this epistemic issue in this contribution. Ayuso and Gratius (2021) emphasize “development problems” in Latin America, with an explicit reference to how China’s demand for commodities solidifies the “neo-extractivist style of development”, while not mentioning Europe’s current and historical role in extractivism of commodities. Furthermore, they criticize the loss

of EU aid following graduation of middle-income countries in Latin America and they welcome the recent reintroduction of development assistance to the region through the EU “Regional Facility for Development in Transition” in Latin America. Similarly, Winand (2021) is concerned with how the graduation of India on the development ladder in 2014 led to the withdrawal of EU aid budgets, specifically grant-based bilateral assistance, and this despite the fact that most of the world’s poor live in India. However, the EU continued to pursue “traditional development objectives” after India’s graduation through regional and thematic funding. As in the contribution by Ayuso and Gratius (2021), and despite nuances, this realignment back to normal is generally presented as a positive evolution.

Nonetheless, these contributions do provide some critical insights that could be further extended. For instance, Ayuso and Gratius (2021) place relevant question marks with the “linear” view on development and suggest that development should be seen as a multidimensional process. Furthermore, Winand (2021) briefly reflects on the problematic notion of “graduation”. The latter implies that countries can reach a stage of “uneasy adolescence” as compared to the “mature donors” of the OECD. More substantially, the main goal of Langan and Price (2021) is to “problematize” the EU’s approach to trade, development and migration in the context of Africa–EU relations. They do this by pointing at “paradoxes” in relation to the EU’s purported “harmony” between trade policies, development goals and migration objectives, and they do this through qualitative in-depth interviews with local farmers. Most prominently, they argue that the EPAs may increase migration flows to the EU.

Reconstructing EU policies

This is undoubtedly the most challenging step, perhaps because we do not yet know the implications of provincialization and engagement. Based on Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis, reconstruction would imply that, building on the previous steps, EU policies are recalibrated with a view to redefining EU interests in terms of “shared commitments” and make them more “inclusive” and “transformational” (Fisher-Onar & Nicolaïdis, 2021, pp. 293–294). These terms are admittedly vague, and more importantly, they resonate well with development discourse which tends to coopt previously anti-hegemonic concepts. The authors are rather unclear about whether reconstruction concerns enhanced deliberation within the existing framework or a more radical abandonment of existing power structures.

In order to explore this question against the background of the contributions to this volume, we may distinguish between two scenarios. In the first one, the EU continues the colonial avenue. This is not necessarily in contradiction with most authors who suggest that EU development policy (and external action) are becoming more interest-based and overshadowed by migration, security, commercial, investment and other considerations. Once it has become clear that such concerns have always informed European development policy, it becomes easier to identify the neocolonial avenue. Haastrup et al. (2021) suggest that the EU is currently taking this route. Faced with ontological security challenges resulting from “stressors” such as the rise of China, increased African agency, and immigration, the EU’s response has been to continue to “exercise a coloniality of power”. The authors make this point with reference to recent initiatives such as the

European Investment Plan (EIP), the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD), the EPAs, the European Migration Trust Fund, the militarization of development cooperation, and the new agreement with the Organisation of the African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS).

Contributors to this volume are less clear about what a decolonial avenue would look like. A key question is whether this can be achieved within the existing system that is characterized by power asymmetries and, as Dimier (2021) reminds us in this volume, by “client-based relationships”. Saltnes and Steingass (2021) argue that global political justice may be achieved without necessarily focusing on a fair redistribution of resources. Instead of the traditional notion of redistributive justice, they choose to elaborate on the concept of partnership in a way that “absence of domination” can be achieved. Specifically, they identify two conditions for establishing partnerships between international actors, namely, first, “absence of the use of arbitrary power”, entailing that the EU “does not make use of its power surplus to impose its will or preferences on the other”; and second, “a participatory approach”, which allows for “collaborative arrangements and decision-making procedures whereby affected parties would be given a due hearing”. Although these are only “minimum conditions”, the research shows that the EU has failed to achieve them in relation to the ACP (Saltnes & Steingass, 2021). This underscores even more the critical question, not raised by the authors, whether global political justice can be achieved at all without power redistribution.

Compared to this deliberative approach, the contributions by Langan and Price (2021) and Haastrup et al. (2021) more radically challenge power relations. Remarkably, both contributions mention one specific measure that the EU could take: abandoning the EPAs. Langan and Price (2021) advocate a “paradigm shift ... away from current free market orthodoxy” and state that EPAs appear “incommensurate with the EU’s declared intent to alleviate poverty, and its attempts to minimize domestic pressures for migration”. Similarly, in the context of competition with China, Haastrup et al. (2021) suggest that “the logical implication would be to get rid of the EPAs and negotiate relations with Africa via the AU”. While these two contributions do not elaborate on this proposal, a recalibration of EU–Africa relations may indeed start with a rethinking of the EPAs. Negotiated in parallel with the so-called increased commitment to “aid effectiveness” in the 2000s (see above) and heavily criticized by civil society and governments within and outside Africa for their devastating impact on local economies and existing regionalization schemes, the economic gains of EPAs for the EU may turn out to be less beneficial than the political costs that they have incurred. Forming a textbook application of Galtung’s early framework on structural power through exploitation, fragmentation and penetration (Galtung, 1973), the EPAs have never been simply about economic gains but always more fundamentally about the projection of the EU’s image and worldviews. Having dragged on for almost 20 years, the EPA project has been quite harmful for the EU’s so-called soft power in the “partner” countries.

This critique still refers to EU interests – its soft power – as a reconstruction rationale. This is compatible with Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis’ argument that the decentring agenda should support “more effective – not altruistic – external action” by “identifying self-defeating Eurocentric pitfalls” (Fisher-Onar & Nicolaïdis, 2021, p. 293). However, from a post-colonial and post-development perspective one may argue that more radical reconfigurations of power structures would be needed. We do not know what

the position of Haastrup et al. (2021) and Langan and Price (2021) is when it comes to the trade-development nexus, as their contributions do not clarify how exactly this would look like.

Also on other research topics, the contributions generally lack clear views on a recalibrated EU approach. For instance, what would a post-colonial climate change policy look like and (how) can adaptation-aid be organized? In terms of migration, what are the implications for the migration-development nexus and should the EU consider more radical options such as open borders? If blended finance initiatives are mainly serving large scale investors and legitimizing global financial markets, what (if any) role would there still be for the European Investment Bank (EIB) and other development banks in the Global South? In terms of responses to pandemics such as Covid-19, would it be sufficient for the EU to support a TRIPS waiver at the World Trade Organization (WTO) or are more radical reforms needed in the field of global health?

One reason why such questions on how specific policy issues should be reformed are not being addressed, may be because we first need to draw the contours of how a post-colonial EU should look like. Utopian visions within which normative accounts can be embedded seem to be missing in studies on EU development policy and external action more broadly. Engaging with the rich field of post-colonial studies, further research could therefore reflect more creatively and extensively on what a real paradigm change in what used to be called “development policy” would entail. This touches on key questions such as whether global capitalism should be reformed or replaced with something different. The editors (Steingass et al., 2021) already refer to “post-development” in the introduction. Post-development thinking can be seen as “practiced decolonization” (Schöneberg, 2016, p. 43) and offers a pluriverse of alternatives to development (Kothari et al., 2019; Ziai, 2016) that may inspire analysis of the EU’s external action (e.g. Brogna, 2021; Delputte, Orbie, & Schöneberg, 2020; Horký-Hlucháň & Szent-Iványi, 2015; Luciani, 2021; Orbie, Alcazar, & Sioen, 2022; Potjomkina, 2020; Vandeputte, 2021; Verhaeghe, 2021). Within post-colonial scholarship, Bhambra (2016) advocates a move from “neoliberal cosmopolitanism” to “postcolonial cosmopolitanism” (Bhambra, 2016). Referring to Balibar (2003), already in the early stage of the Normative Power Europe debate Manners (2006) referred to the idea of Europe as a “vanishing mediator”, where the EU becomes the “anti-system mediator”. In this EUtopia the EU’s normative action would be judged against the extent to which it becomes less powerful (Manners, 2006, p. 174) and engages in what Balibar calls an “anti-strategic policy” whereby the relation between power and political capacity is fundamentally transformed (Balibar, 2003, pp. 323–335). Rutazibwa proposes to shift the discussion from non-domination to non-interference and seriously consider the option of “ethical retreat” (Rutazibwa, 2013) – thereby showing that “reconstruction” may ultimately amount to “provincialization”.

Global South and the pLEUiverse

This volume represents the most recent theoretical and empirical advances in the EU’s development cooperation policies, for instance by focusing on key concepts (such as partnership) and topics (such as NDICI). While the editors mention the challenge of post-development (Steingass et al., 2021), the purpose of this project was not to

engage in post-colonial, decolonial, decentring or decolonial analysis. Combined with the need for pluralism in academia, it may not be entirely fair to assess the contributions through this lens. From the perspective of active and engaged pluralism, it is nevertheless desirable to critically reflect on the epistemic violence that might reside in a field of study such as EU development policy where interaction with post-colonial insights is limited. Hence my concluding reflections and (self) critiques have explored what a post-colonial and decentring perspective would entail, with references to the pitfalls and promises that can be found in the nine contributions of this volume. Specifically, I followed and adapted the three stages of the framework proposed by Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis (2021), which may be reframed as problematizing the EU development project (provincialization), taking non-European voices into account (engagement), and searching for alternative policies (reconstruction); or even more simply as “stop, listen and act (carefully)” (in this order). In doing so, some questions emerged on what could be further researched, building on the wealth of insights on the EU as a development actor. Such exercises will become increasingly important as the very notion of “development” has become undermined and the rebranding of the EU’s development apparatus (and linked to this, the scholarly literature) in terms of “partnership” may not be sufficient as a response. Several contributions to this volume have indeed shown that the notion of “partnership” is not new and that its actual implementation is still problematic. This would beg for a more radical rethinking and “revamping the field” (cf. Sebhatu, 2020, p. 47) of study on the EU’s role vis-à-vis the Global South.

Even more challenging are the implications of the “Global South” concept, which is increasingly used in the latest rebranding of development discourse. At least according to some interpretations, the notion does not solely refer to people or groups who are geographically situated outside the EU borders, but it also accounts for those marginalized and dominated groups within the so-called Northern countries (e.g. Clarke, 2018). Relatedly, Kinnvall argues that post-colonial European studies should also address the “internal subaltern”. Although these “outsiders” exist on the margin, they are spatially inside the EU and are confronted with “the hostilities of an abjective longing for a nostalgic past” (Kinnvall, 2021, p. 81). Balibar (2003, p. 23) points out how realization of the “deep contradictions” of EU democracy may fuel the realization of an anti-systemic power. Hence the challenge is not only to look “out of Africa” by also considering the European neighbourhood (as suggested by the editors), but also to look “inside Europe” and its development flaws. While in theory the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Agenda 2030 of the United Nations already encouraged us to blur the boundaries between North and South, this has in practice not happened in EU development studies where the SDGs seem to constitute another iteration of the development project that was outlined by Truman in 1949 and that finds its roots in colonial times (cf. Ziai, 2016, chapter 14).

The next “graduation” of the discipline could therefore lie in examining what “development”, or more broadly the “good life” or “emancipation”, means and how the EU may (not) contribute to a utopian “pLEUiverse”. This then involves the study of topics such as the EU’s approach to LGBTQI, structural racism, discrimination and labour abuses outside *and within* Europe. The aim would be not only to contrast internal versus external policies and discover double standards in EU policies, but also, and more profoundly, to examine how (neo)colonial and other paradigms play out in EU politics, and how

“post-development” alternatives could also apply to Europe’s transition for instance through de-growth (Escobar, 2015). Basically, this research agenda concerns the development or “civilization” of the EU itself. It would indeed involve, as stated by Haastrup et al. (2021), a reimagination of the “boundaries” of “self” for the EU, which recognizes that coloniality is an ugly part of this self.

If we consider this widening of the research agenda through the “Global South” concept, the replacement of the “development” label by “international partnerships” may be a step backwards, as it again steers us to only look outside. Whether it is called “development cooperation” or “international partnerships”, disciplinary confinements may need to transcend the institutional confinements imposed by policy-makers instead of merely adopting them, and post-colonial approaches provide promising and much-needed tools in this regard.

Finally, I have to clarify that my definition of what constitutes the “literature” or “discipline” of EU development policy has been quite narrow, based on self-definitions in major textbooks, conferences and journals in the area of EU studies. However, as stated above, a rich literature about Europe’s post-colonial challenges and the issues mentioned in the previous paragraph already exists. Hence the suggestion for existing scholarship may be less to graduate and reach the next stage and more to connect with thinking that is already out there. In the process of such engagement, EU development policy scholarship may become its own variant of a “vanishing mediator”.

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