Keywords: decentring, difference, Eurocentrism, European foreign policy, foreign policy analysis

Introduction

In *The Decentring Agenda: Europe as a post-colonial power*, Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013: 283) amplify the call for ‘a paradigm shift that decentres the study and practice of Europe’s international relations’, a shift that is ‘necessary both to make sense of our multipolar order and to reconstitute European agency in a non-European world’\(^1\). Their plea fits within a broader academic debate about the need to decentre Europe, the West and the IR discipline (Chakrabarty, 2000; Jørgensen, 2010; Morozov, 2013; Nayak & Selbin, 2010), to open up for “difference” (Inayatullah & Blaney, 2004; Tickner & Blaney, 2012), and explore non-Western IR theories and approaches (Bischoff et al, 2016; Buzan & Acharya, 2010; Tickner & Wæver, 2009). Nevertheless, as they emphasize, ‘Eurocentrism stubbornly survived European imperialism’. The ‘imperative of “decentring” or “provincializing” Europe spoke from the margins, largely ignored by western scholars, policy makers and publics alike’, with most social scientific disciplines being faintly ‘equipped to engage with other lifeworlds’ (2013: 283-284).

Eurocentrism is also present in the analysis of Europe’s foreign policy (including relations between the European continent and other regions, and external relations and foreign policy of the EU and its member states) (Keuleers et al., 2016). Exceptions to this Eurocentric account can be found in some strands of literature on Europe’s international relations, including the “external perceptions” literature (Chaban & Holland, 2013; Lucarelli & Fioramonti, 2010; Mayer & Zielonka, 2012), critical assessments of the “Normative Power Europe” concept that point to its Eurocentric discourse (Diez, 2005; Parker & Rosamond, 2013; Sjursen, 2006), and some literature on the EU’s policies towards the Mediterranean (Cavatorta & Pace, 2010) or China (Pan, 2012).

In their *Decentring Agenda*, Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013) propose an analytical framework to overcome a Euro- and Western-centric approach in the study and praxis of Europe’s international relations, thereby relying on insights from IR and European Studies, and including both empirical and normative dimensions. Analytically, their agenda consists of three dimensions, which are partially overlapping and co-constitutive. In short, *provincializing* requires a questioning of ‘Eurocentric accounts of world history and

\(^1\) For the difference, similarity and relationship between the terms “Europe” and “the West” and “Eurocentrism” and “Western-centrism”, see Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013: 284) and several of the other publications mentioned in this paragraph. In this paper we will mainly refer to “Europe”, “European” and “Eurocentrism”, while acknowledging that these are to a major extent embedded within the broader ‘Western’ context.
politics’ and of ‘Eurocentric “civilizational” assumptions’. *Engagement* implies ‘learning from the other’, an engaging with others’ perspectives and accounts of the world and with the assumptions, worldviews and value systems by which these accounts are underpinned. *Reconstruction* requires ‘renewing of EU praxis in a non-European world, from the outside in, as it were’, including the ‘exploration of more ‘decentred’ approaches to the EU’s external relations on the basis of mutuality and empowerment’ (286, 289). With the theoretical foundations and analytical parameters set, the following question is how this can be operationalized in concrete research projects. In other words, how can the Decentring Agenda be translated into a systematic decentred analytical praxis?

Constructing a Decentred Analytical Praxis: building blocks and challenges

Building on own fieldwork and interaction with non-Western scholars and practitioners, and on earlier work that analyses the EU’s foreign policy from the outside (Keukeleire, 2014; Keukeleire & Thépaut, 2012), this paper proposes six partially overlapping and co-constitutive categories (see Table 1). Four of these categories are immaterial and touch upon ontological questions (*time, polity, norms* and *language*), while *space* refers to the geographic and material context. These categories allow us to systematically cover some main facets of what “difference” may entail and what it may imply to go beyond Euro- or Western-centrism. In order to further help scholars in turning the Decentring Agenda into a Decentred Analytical Praxis, a section on *discipline and methodology* focuses on the epistemological and methodological challenges of decentring. For each of these categories we suggest further subcategories to help scholars apply them in their own research. In each category of decentring, we focus on *provincializing* and *engagement*, which may serve as further impetus to *reconstruction*. *Reconstruction* is not discussed in this article due to the (word) limits of a paper (which also explains the brief analysis of some categories, such as linguistic and spatial decentring).

Operationalizing the Decentring Agenda is definitely not without pitfalls, as Fischer Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013) already noted. The first obvious challenge is that most Western scholars are trained within the mainstream Western-centric IR paradigms and/or the conventional Eurocentric field of European Studies. Even scholars working within Post-colonial, Post-modernity or Critical Theories are largely constrained or influenced by categories and parameters set by the main Western-centric theoretical approaches. How can Western scholars systematically engage in ‘thinking outside of the Eurocentric box’ (285) when they are inherently part of that box, shaped by a Western-centric intellectual and cultural legacy? They have a normal tendency to ‘selectively filter information about the broader world in terms of its relevance for parochial concerns’ (289-290). Vice versa, they may not pick up information and concepts that are important in non-European or non-Western contexts, if these barely or not resonate with the own ontological, epistemological or linguistic frameworks, or are undetectable by conventional methodological approaches. Some examples, discussed throughout this paper, may illustrate this: when reading or hearing concepts such as *Warfalla, al-`adala, lichnost, ubuntu or guanxi* – there is a major chance that European or Western scholars will not notice them, and even when they do, will not fully understand their meaning. This is linked to a related pitfall: even when scholars make use of non-Western perspectives or concepts, there is a large chance that ‘bona fide empirical engagement remains embedded in normative Eurocentrism’ through falling back on Western or European frames of reference (290). The various subcategories in our framework intend to support scholars in limiting the potential consequences of these pitfalls.

A second challenge is to avoid that decentring leads to fragmentation into case-specific knowledge, with no relevance for other cases (areas or societies), no potential for comparative analysis or possibility of generalisation. The inherent limitations of the abstract level are then simply swapped by the limitations of ad-hoc knowledge. This calls for pursuing some middle level of categorisation in developing our analytical framework, which transcends ad-hocism and fragmentation. Following the approach of Chabal and Dalloz

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2 This analytical framework makes use of experiences through fieldwork and projects conducted in Kosovo (2008-2009), the DRCongo (2010 & 2013) and Egypt (2015), and through cooperation with scholars from the MENA region (2012) and China (2013-2014).
(2006: 22), the purpose is to develop a framework which can be applied systematically ‘to widely divergent cases, in different areas, and enabling the analyst to [assess both] singularities and commonalities’ and translate ‘local […] accounts into a language that is amenable to comparison with other cases’.

Thirdly, one must avoid that the decentring exercise leads to simplifications, to attributing the decentred world ‘with a monolithical or static character’ (Fisher Onar & Nicolaïdis, 2013: 296) or to overemphasising or artificially creating difference between the “Self” (the West or Europe) and the “Other”. As Morozov (2013: xiii, 8) emphasizes, ‘the border between the West and the non-West is not a geographical one – it runs across societies and shapes our national and social identities’. Countries, regions and societies – outside and within Europe – are characterized by a high degree of complexity and hybridity: several processes and realities can exist in parallel, can be overlapping or separated, compatible or incompatible, mutually reinforcing or mutually undermining, visible or invisible, and dynamic in time and space. Decentring can help increase ‘receptivity to multiple lifeworlds, social imaginaries, public philosophies and the practice to which they give rise’ (Fisher Onar & Nicolaïdis, 2013, 296), not only outside but also within Europe and the West.

This paper aims to provide an analytical framework for operationalizing the rather abstract Decentring Agenda by proposing conceptual lenses and categorizations that facilitate opening up for difference and for seeing and understanding dynamics and realities that go beyond dominant Western and Eurocentric categories, while trying to avoid simplifications and fragmentation of knowledge.

Table 1: Dimensions of decentring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DECENTRING</th>
<th>Provincializing</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Temporal decentring</strong></td>
<td>Questioning Eurocentric accounts and the myth of Eurocentric civilizational primacy*</td>
<td>Learning from the other and engaging with others’ perspectives and assumptions*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- European benchmark dates and events</td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>- Other benchmark dates and events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Specific historical trajectory (modernisation paradigm, historicism)</td>
<td>- Other developmental trajectories and pathways to “modernity” (hybridity)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Specific perception of time</td>
<td><strong>Normative decentring</strong></td>
<td>Pluralist or liberal norms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Universality?</td>
<td>Learning variations regarding:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Interpretation?</td>
<td>- Rights ↔ responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Application?</td>
<td>- Individualism ↔ collectivism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Prioritization/hierarchy?</td>
<td>- Secularism ↔ religiosity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Polity decentring</strong></td>
<td>- Westphalian state-centric focus</td>
<td>Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Modernity bias</td>
<td>- Different polities, e.g.:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Religion, ethnicity, warlordism based</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Patrimonialism (kin selection and reciprocal altruism)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Linguistic decentring</strong></td>
<td>English as lingua franca</td>
<td>Learning through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Language barrier</td>
<td>- Multi-disciplinarity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Rough translation</td>
<td>- Area studies (attention to descriptive work)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spatial decentring</strong></td>
<td>Specific geographical features, engendering specific interests</td>
<td>- Non-positivist approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- European/Western space</td>
<td>- Local empirical work</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- European/Western material situation</td>
<td><strong>Disciplinary decentring</strong></td>
<td>Constraints of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Theoretical perspectives</td>
<td>Learning through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Research practices</td>
<td>- Multi-disciplinarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Positivist approaches</td>
<td>- Area studies (attention to descriptive work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Dominant use Western/European sources</td>
<td>- Non-positivist approaches</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Temporal decentring

I. History matters: ‘every significant political phenomenon lives in history, and requires historically grounded analysis for its explanation’ (Tilly, 2006: 433). Provincializing, as a first step in temporal decentring, implies an awareness that the analysis and practice of EU foreign policy is characterized by a Eurocentric framing of history which is often too easily generalized to other parts of the world or too easily taken as a point of departure for (the analysis of) Europe’s relations with and policies towards other regions.

The tendency to overprivilege the experience of modern Europe is reflected in the use of an ‘orthodox set’ of benchmark dates or foundational events that have taken place in Europe or the West in general (Chakrabarty, 2007: 7). Buzan and Lawson (2012) point to the following benchmark events: 1500 (opening sea lanes from Europe to the Americas and Indian Ocean), the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, WWI and WWII, the Cold War, and to some extent “9/11”. These events are related to specific historical experiences, collective memories and “lessons” drawn from them, also with regard to Europe’s external relations and policies (e.g. opening the sea lanes as a benchmark reflects a perspective in which Europe could legitimately use these for imperialist purposes). The praxis and analysis of the EU’s foreign policy are also inspired by some foundational events related to the EU itself – such as the start of European integration (partly in response to the world wars), the Maastricht Treaty (and creation of the CFSP) and Lisbon Treaty (creating the EEAS and function of HR/VP). The impact of the own historical development is made explicit in Art. 21(1) of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU): ‘The Union's action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world […]’.

On a second level, provincializing implies an awareness of the Western and European historical trajectory. Chakrabarty (2007) sheds light on how Western social science is generally inscribed within a modernity paradigm in which evolution is thought of as fundamentally progressive and having a universal orientation towards Westphalian statehood (see Polity decentring). This specific idea of modernity is defined by Taylor (2002: 92) as ‘new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization) and new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality)’. It is seen as the basis of a ‘European political modernity’ (Fischer Onar & Müftüler-Baç, 2011: 379), the result of often idealized interpretations of humanism, Enlightenment, the French Revolution and other European “emancipatory” movements and ideologies. This modernity paradigm also has implications for what is regarded as a core value and how individuals and society relate to politics (see Normative decentring). This paradigm has often been projected onto the histories of the non-West (Buzan & Little, 2000) and influenced Europe’s expectations regarding logical developmental trajectories in other parts of the world, as if ‘we were all headed for the same destination […] but some people were to arrive earlier than others’ (Chakrabarty, 2007: 8). However, these “Enlightened ideas” have themselves been ‘drawn from very particular intellectual and historical traditions that could not claim any universal validity’ (xiii).

A related element of Eurocentrism is the assumption that the current situation in Europe can be taken for granted and that we can look only to the present to make evaluations and judgements about polities and norms or how others should behave and develop. As Fukuyama (2011: 14) notes, ‘people living in industrialized countries now suffer from a historical amnesia regarding how their societies came to that point in the first place’, disregarding the often long, painful and non-linear evolution, the complex historical circumstances in which this occurred, and diversified reality to which it gave rise. One example is LGTB-rights or gender equality (Verloo, 2007), seemingly obvious values in Europe now, but not at all evident in the past, only relatively recently recognized and still not univocally applied. Provincializing should thus include an awareness of evolution and diversity within Europe and the West itself and a willingness to go beyond idealised, mythicized or simplified versions of Western historical trajectories.

Finally, provincializing entails a consciousness about the perception of time in Europe and the West, and how this impacts on the praxis and analysis of European external relations. As Birth (2016) emphasizes in
**Time Blind**, modern concepts of time constrain our perception and understanding of temporal diversity and temporalities outside the logics of European-derived ideas about time. The in general rather short-term oriented European time perspective explains, for example, misperceptions regarding long-term developments in the Islamic world or regarding the nature of ‘strategic’ partnerships with China and other powers (Stumbaum & Xiong, 2012).

II. *Engagement* requires learning about and from different time frames which are important for other societies, countries and regions. The consequence of the above-analysed self-proclaimed “mainstream” historical frame, is that the non-West is often compelled to relate and “negotiate” their history with a particularly Western framing of history and international relations. Engagement demands that they are taken serious as such, including different sets of political judgements about polities and norms as a consequence of other historical frames (Tickner & Blaney, 2012: 18-19).

Firstly, it implies the recognition of *other benchmark dates or foundational events*, calling for a thorough knowledge of local histories, collective memories, and the implications these may have until today. These experiences may be unrelated to Western involvement, but can also be associated with dynamics of imperialism, colonialism, use of violence, dispossession and expropriation, in which Europe and the West played a crucial role (i.a. Buzan & Lawson, 2012; Shilliam, 2011). These dynamics are often concealed in European timeframes, but remain reflected in benchmark dates and events in other regions, e.g. dates of independence, European conquest and invasions, and other ‘Echoes of Empire’ (Nicolaidis et al., 2015). Examples from the Middle East are the Sykes-Picot Treaty, the different Arab-Israeli wars, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and various military invasions by Western coalitions. Examples related to China include the “Century of Humiliation” (including Chinese defeats in the Opium Wars, the destruction of the Old Summer Palace by French and British forces, the Treaty of Nankin, etc.) and the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Interestingly, these events are often subject to European ‘historical amnesia’, with the EU living the illusion of ‘a fascinating kind of “virgin birth” – as if the new entity had nothing to do with the past of its most powerful Member States’ (Fisher Onar & Nicolaidis, 2013: 284).

Engagement also means paying attention to *other developmental trajectories* than evolution towards European-style modernity. Not only may “modernity” have a different starting point elsewhere, there are also ‘alternative pathways to modernity that diverge from prevalent understandings in Europe and the West’ (Delanty & Rumford, 2005; Fisher Onar & Nicolaidis, 2013: 290-291). Moreover, different perceptions of what modernity entails exist (Chakrabarty, 2007; Dirlik, 2003) and alternative modernities may even choose to revert to tradition. In this respect, the concept “hybridity” comes to the fore, as both ‘a product of and reaction to modernity’ (Fisher Onar & Müftüler-Baç, 2011: 380; Morozov, 2013). Engagement not merely entails seeing current differences, but also the trial and error of using “Western” ideologies (e.g. nationalism, socialism, liberalism, secularism, capitalism), resulting in a denouncement of what did/does not work and a turn to what did/does. Engaging with others’ historical trajectories helps us understand existing differences or hybridity, being the conjunction between “local” histories and the dominant design of modernity. The rise of Islamism constitutes such an alternative modernity: a modern political current with societies, movements and parties in other parts of the world developing and following variations of this trajectory (Fisher Onar & Müftüler-Baç, 2011; Ismail, 2004). Daesh or “Islamic State” takes this hybridity to the extreme with its use of Western modernity on the one hand (e.g. technology and social media), but its return to tradition and religion, and its renouncement of state borders drawn by the West on the other.

**Normative decentring**

I. Finnemore and Sinnink (1998: 891) define a norm as ‘a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity’. What is deemed as acceptable behaviour not only changes over time (cf. the “norm life cycle”), but also differs according to place (Postel-Vinay, 2008: 39-40). This conceptualisation makes the “universality of norms” an inherent contradiction and calls into question claims to universality of a certain
normative mind-set, as a norm is then always associated with a specific temporal and spatial context. Provincializing allows analysts and practitioners to become aware of the often quite specific interpretation given to a norm and its field of application, of the prioritisation of norms, and of the norms that receive less attention or are not part of a normative mind-set (because they are not seen as norms or because they are simply unknown). The meaning, application and prioritization of norms then appear more “provincial”, Europe-specific or time-specific than assumed.

Both in the analysis and praxis of Europe’s international relations, the focus is predominantly on norms that fit within European and Western ideas of a liberal pluralist order. In the section on “Temporal decentering”, we already referred to a set of norms which derive from a certain idea of modernity devised during the Enlightenment and have underpinned Western and European truth claims ever since. Within the context of the EU’s external relations, the aforementioned Article 21(1) TEU enumerates norms which the EU ‘seeks to advance in the wider world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity […]’. These norms are recurrent in documents and declarations about the EU’s external action and also permeate the widespread debate triggered by Manners’ (2002) “Normative Power Europe” (NPE) concept (for an overview: Whitman, 2011; Whitman & Nicolaidis, 2013). Unpacking these norms exposes that European assumptions about norms are not necessarily universal, nor of universal priority, although often presented as such (Bacon, 2015). Tocci (2008: 4) correctly points to the ‘serious pitfall that has bedevilled much of the literature on EU foreign policy: subjectivity and presumed universality’. Even critics of NPE who point to the EU’s failure to behave as a normative power or criticize its civilizational pretentions, generally remain embedded in Europe’s normative framework and will, for instance, rarely or never evaluate NPE or Europe’s behaviour in terms of “respect”, “justice” or “stability” (cf. infra). Even norms such as “equality”, “solidarity” and “dignity”, which appear in the TEU and the NPE enumeration, generally gain less attention or priority.

Provincializing also provides deeper insight into how the prioritized norms are interpreted and applied, which we illustrate briefly through two dominant normative narratives in the practice and analysis of EU foreign policy: human rights and democracy. Provincializing human rights shows that attention for human rights is not only selective, but that “first generation” civil and political rights gain more attention than “second generation” economic, social, cultural or “third generation” solidarity rights. Normative preoccupations mainly revolve around individual liberties instead of collective rights (cf. infra) (Donnelly, 2007; Moyn, 2010; Zhang, 2012). Provincializing democracy equally shows that attention for democracy is not only selective, but also reflects specific meanings, interpretations and applications which may differ from ‘non-Western’ interpretations or variations of democracy (Lamont et al., 2015; Morozov, 2013; Youngs 2015). For example, democracy is mainly seen as relevant in the context of the national and not the international level (cf. the composition of the UN Security Council) and is often analysed without taking into account the power of economic actors over democratically elected governments.

II. Engagement requires from analysts and practitioners to learn about the norms that are prioritized in other societies, countries or regions and the specific interpretation and application of these norms, as well as about norms that receive less or no attention in these societies, countries or regions. Additionally, the question can be raised how these norms relate to “European” and “Western” norms. The task is thus to engage with important norms in other world views, even when they are not core norms in European thinking. In order to avoid the aforementioned danger of creating fragmented knowledge and to allow for comparative analysis, it can be analytically useful to position the findings about these norms within a set of continua of normative thinking. We propose three interrelated continua of normative mind-sets: rights–responsibilities, individualism–collectivism (relationality), secular–religious.

The first continuum is related to variations of focus on rights and freedoms on the one hand and responsibilities and obligations on the other. Questions that arise are whether the emphasis is on rights or responsibilities (or variation of both), whose rights and whose responsibilities are emphasized, and towards
who people or entities are responsible. When engaging, we learn that the individual’s responsibility towards his/her group or country can be prioritised over the individual’s personal freedom. Examples are the Chinese societal context in which obligations towards the group one belongs to are morally higher than individual rights (Zhang, 2012) or the discussion on “duties” versus “rights” in the Islamic discourse (Orakzai, 2012). This contrasts with the current Western and European focus on individual rights, often regarded as detached from responsibilities, duties or obligations – although it is clear that this also varied over different stages of Europe’s historical trajectory and still varies throughout European society.

The rights–responsibilities continuum is closely related to the continuum between the individual and the collective/relational. Collectivism can be a more fundamental and positive norm than individualism in some societies. Individual human rights are then perceived as an incomplete normative framework, as ‘it is impossible to ground the collective linkages and solidarity without which no society can survive’ (de Sousa Santos, 2002: 50). In many societies, norms are thus derived from the intricate interrelation between the individual and the larger social group. This can be illustrated through three concepts: the southern African idea of ubuntu (meaning that ‘one is a person through others’) (Smith, 2012: 311); the Russian term lichnost (conceptualization of the individual implying that (s)he will be able to ‘develop all its endowments only in a harmonic and solidary society of equals’) (Kharkhordin, 1999: 190); and the Confusion notion of guanxi (the assumption that every person ‘lives in a network of social relations, without which he cannot be identified’) (Pan, 2016: 2-3). Despite the differences between the historical and societal context in which these concepts arose, all three reflect notions of relationality, of how an individual exists within and through a social context, with implications for the predominance of the collective over the individual. There are other sets of norms related to this, which are of crucial importance in other parts of the world, but may – more than is often assumed – also be important in Europe. Examples are “respect” and “honour” in the Mediterranean world, and mianzi or “face” in Asian cultures – referring to the importance of protecting others’ dignity and prestige (Buckley et al., 2006). A second example is “justice” or, in Arabic, al-‘adala, which means ‘giving to each his due’, creating equality, harmony and stability, and is considered as the ‘highest political value’ (therefore appearing in names of prominent political parties in the MENA region) (Ayubi, 2005: 18). This leads to a third example, being “stability” or “harmony”, both in personal relations and in international order. These values may appear of higher priority than e.g. democracy, which is seen as problematic if it leads to chaos or does not engender greater equality, social inclusion, justice or stability (Ding, 2012; Morozov 2013).

A third major continuum lies between secular and religious/divine/spiritual order. Within the context of Western secularism, religion is a largely ignored category as a result of Western Enlightenment’s normative presumptions (Sheikh & Wæver, 2012). However, as de Sousa Santos (2002: 48) notes, ‘the secular-religious distinction is a distinctly Western one’ and may be irrelevant within other normative mind-sets. In the umma, the personal relationship with Allah is the principal overarching value, implying an array of norms associated with Islamic belief (see Polity decentring). In Buddhist and Hindu societies, the idea of dharma sees the individual primarily as part of a whole and rather than on rights or democracy, the focus is on ‘the primordial imperative, the duty of individuals to find their place in the order of the entire society and of the entire cosmos’ (49). Both concepts point to a personal, spiritual relationship with a divinity or cosmic order as a fundamental value, which has implications both for the (un)importance and position of norms promoted in European foreign policy and for the way the West and Europe are perceived.

**Polity decentring**

In this section of the decentring endeavour, we use the term “polity” (Ferguson & Mansbach, 1996; Ferguson et al, 2000; Walby 2004), which allows us to conceptualize a wide set of authority structures with varying degrees of institutionalization and hierarchy, while not necessarily bound by territorial boundaries – including states, but also international organizations and various forms of patronial and other “traditional” systems, such as clans or tribes. Polities have the top-down capacity to exert control in their sphere of influence and mobilize people and resources, but, from a bottom-up members perspective, are
also crucial in terms of identity, legitimacy, loyalty, (physical, social and normative) order, and the provision of vital goods and services. In the conceptualization of Ferguson et al. (2000: 29-30) the ‘domain of each polity consists of those persons who identify with it, the resources it can command, the “reach” it has with respect to adherents located in “space” [...] and issues’. This explains why there is a ‘vast array of polities’ which ‘overlap, layer, nest, and interact – coexist, cooperate, and conflict in the context of particular issues’. “Nested” polities ‘lie partially or wholly within the domain of another polity’. Their nature, as well as the relationship between them, are subject of continuous change which may be very visible, but in some cases ‘so slow as to be almost imperceptible’.

I. Provincializing polity in the analysis and praxis of Europe’s foreign policy implies unpacking the predominance of a specific set of polities, which reflect a Westphalian state-centric and modernity bias (Ferguson et al., 2000; Inayatullah & Blaney, 2004) (see Temporal decentring). The Westphalian state-centric bias means that the main reference points are territorial sovereign states and relations between states (with governments considered as the main actors within these states), as well as polities based on or derived from states, such as international organizations (mostly consisting of states) or NGO’s and civil society (interlocutors for governmental actors). The modernity bias is reflected in the Weberian conception of the modern state (and its institutional and functional capacities) and in the dominant Western and European focus on individualism, citizenship and the distinctions between public/private, state/society and politics/religion. Taken together, both biases lead to assumptions about the state as the main point of reference, not only as an authority structure, but also in terms of identity, legitimacy, order, and the provision of vital goods and services.

Unpacking these assumptions requires an awareness of the long and difficult evolution and diversity that was and still is a reality within Europe and the West itself. By unravelling the ‘complex historical circumstances under which institutions were originally created’, we may better understand why ‘their transfer and imitation are difficult even under modern circumstances’ (Fukuyama, 2011: 438). Provincializing infers realising the anachronism and rarity of ‘an “ideal” type of modern statehood’, as states with full internal and external sovereignty have always been ‘the exception rather than the rule’ (Risse, 2011: 1-2). Authority is also increasingly constrained and challenged by a wide variety of actors and networks, including international organizations such as the EU – also a polity (Jørgensen et al., 2007). In addition, there is a growing number of ‘areas of limited statehood’ (Risse, 2011) or ‘ungoverned spaces’ (Clunan & Trinkunas, 2010) where alternatives to state authority exist, as is also reflected in the rise of religious, ethnic and tribal identities (Ferguson et al., 2000: 3). Provincializing thus implies the abandoning of what Agnew (1994: 77) calls the ‘territorial trap’, being the misconception of the ‘historical relationship between territorial states and the broader social and economic structures and geopolitical order [...] in which these states must operate’.

II. Engagement requires that analysts and practitioners learn more about and from other overlapping, layered, nested and interacting polities. Which polities exist and exert control, in general or in specific domains, in terms of providing authority, identity, legitimacy, (physical, social and/or normative) order, and vital goods and services? How do various polities relate to each other with regard to domains and added-values? One way to approach these questions is case-specifically, looking for answers within the specific context of the countries or regions that are analysed or are the subject of European foreign policy. In addition to states, this may bring to the fore the importance of a wide range of ethnicity-based or identity-based polities (labelled differently in different regions, such as tribes in Arab countries, Afghanistan and Pakistan; clans in Central Asia; ethnic groups, kingdoms and chiefdoms in sub-Saharan Africa), religion-based polities (ranging from the wide variety of Islamic movements and networks such as the Muslim Brotherhood, to the Caliphate established by Daesh or the wider community of believers referred to with umma), and, in the context of ‘failed’/‘failing’ states, also ‘warlordism’-based polities (Marten, 2012) – or combinations of these various polity types.
A second approach is to look more generally at some underlying fundamental features of polities, such as a core principle of political recruitment: *patrimonialism*. Patrimonialism results from two mechanisms that shape natural human sociability: kin selection and reciprocal altruism. While kin selection entails that people will generally act altruistically towards (genetic or perceived) relatives, reciprocal altruism means a tendency ‘to develop relationships of mutual benefit or mutual harm’ through interaction with others over time (Fukuyama, 2011: 439). Patrimonialism can imply *horizontal* loyalty towards the group and mutual solidarity between its members, or it can consist of *vertical* loyalty and dependency between “patrons” or chiefs and their “clients”, where the patron remains legitimately in power as long as he can provide for the needs (identity, legitimacy, order, goods and services) of his clients. This exchange can also occur through the mediation of brokers such as a bureaucracy (labelled as “neo-patrimonialism”) (Erdmann & Engel, 2007; Bach, 2011). Various polities can then be subjected to a comparative analysis on a more abstract level, to learn about and from the extent and way in which these polities provide authority, identity, legitimacy, (physical, social and/or normative) order, and vital goods and services. This can occur both within the context of “functioning states” or in the context of “failed”/“failing”/“weak” states (and variation/continuum in between), with the latter already developed in the aforementioned research on “areas of limited statehood” (Risse, 2011) or “ungoverned spaces” (Clunan & Trinkunas, 2010).

The impact of various kinds of polities can be critical in the absence of (well-developed) formal state structures or a well-developed functioning welfare state (a European phenomenon). Where the influence of the state is limited – due to a lack of effective rule enforcement, economic incentives, national identity – people may prefer or revert to other polities, which then become crucial determinants instead of or complementary to formal state structures. The latter points to the above-mentioned complex and dynamic interrelationship between different relevant polities, which can have implications for the conduct and analysis of a foreign policy towards these complexes of polities.

**Linguistic decentring**

*I. Linguistic decentring is necessary, as ‘any language by its structure, its metaphors and its vocabulary imposes a pattern of thought which reflects its parent culture’ (Groom, 2005: 169-170). Provincializing requires an awareness that also the analysis and praxis of European foreign policy is embedded in and constrained by the predominant linguistic frameworks in Europe and the West. A first aspect is the dominance of English in the international scholarly debate in particular (see Disciplinary decentring). English as lingua franca facilitates international academic interactions, but can also be an obstacle for the participation of scholars from other language groups. Moreover, as Waever (1998: 694-695) emphasized, the dominant *stylistic criteria* ‘are those of the American brand of the Anglo-Saxon intellectual style, with brief, straightforward statements and linear progression of an argument’. Whereas this can be seen as spelling out clarity, it can also act as ‘a barrier to expressing real complexity’, particularly when compared to other languages such as German or Asian languages. Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013: 288) point in this context to linguistic convention, i.e. ‘the stylized Manichean representations of complex phenomena’ as one of the reasons for resistance to provincializing.*

**Secondly, even when analysts and practitioners involved in European foreign policy have considerable language skills, these are generally limited to languages used within the EU and rarely include non-European languages. Only a very limited number of European foreign policy scholars is able to read primary and secondary sources, understand, talk and conduct interviews in Arabic (in its various forms), Farsi, Turkmen, Mandarin, Hausa, or other Asian or African languages that are used in countries or regions which are the subject of European foreign policy. This also implies that a whole body of potentially relevant literature and data goes unnoticed or neglected due to a linguistic barrier. Research on, for example, EU-China relations or European foreign policy towards Arab countries can be nearly exclusively be based on Western sources, which raises questions about the validity of the conclusions that are being produced. Moreover, also when non-Western scholars convey their thoughts and research in English, they**
often transfer particular perceptions, adapt their language and research to a Western or European audience, and represent a distinct socio-economic or political background.

Thirdly, linguistic provincializing implies an awareness that European foreign policy practitioners and analysts may then be ignorant of basic information and of concepts, ideas and approaches, that may be key to understanding other regions of the world (and Europe’s foreign policy towards these regions), but foreign to the own linguistic framework, conceptual lenses and cognitive world. Major differences may also exist in manners of communicating, in a problem which is not simply solved by learning non-European languages or translating non-European concepts in European languages, as specific words may entail a different meaning depending on society, place, time and context. Chakrabarty (2007: 17) refers to the problem of ‘translating diverse forms, practices, and understandings of life into universalist political-theoretical categories of deeply European origin’, leading to ‘“rough translations” of native terms’.

II. Linguistic engagement implies analysing other regions, countries and societies (and Europe’s relations with them and foreign policy towards them) from within local linguistic frameworks and contexts. This calls for collaboration with scholars who have a sound knowledge of the local language and a sound understanding of the broader linguistic and communicative context and the related conceptual lenses, as these are needed to unveil both fundamental meanings and subtle nuances.

In the sections on polity and normative decentring, we already gave some examples of meanings getting “lost in translation” when adopting Western terminology for complex non-Western concepts, as the fundamental meaning of concepts such as al-adala and lichnost is not covered by “justice” and “individual”. It points to the need to engage with the deeper understanding of these concepts. An example regarding the different manners of communicating is the avoidance of the word ‘no’ in Asian communication. Indirect strategies to convey a refusal or disagreement vis-à-vis someone else are preferred as these are less “face-threatening” and in concordance with the basic value of “harmony” (see Normative decentring regarding implications for mianzi (face) and guanxi (relationship)) (Boonkongsan, 2013; Buckley et al., 2006; Hashimoto & Yamagishi, 2013). However, the implications of the inclination towards “rejection avoidance” is often overlooked by European foreign policy scholars and practitioners, which renders them blind to the sensitivities associated therewith. These examples also illustrate the importance of working together with scholars from the concerned countries or area specialists (see Disciplinary decentring).

Spatial decentring

Spatial decentring focuses on the basic geographic features of a society, polity or region (regarding geographical location and size, topographical aspects, environment, natural resources, etc.) and on how this “space” is organized and perceived, both internally and in relationship to other “spaces” (cf. infrastructure, availability of public goods and services, socio-economic features, demography, etc.). Geographic situation and “space” or “place” matter (Therborn, 2006), as our location shapes ‘the way we interpret geographical space […] and geopolitical processes’ (Al-Rodhan, 2009: 42). As Therborn (2006: 509) asserts, ‘politics begins with place’ and ‘the Western notion of politics derives from a particular place and the concerns of its inhabitants’, which also impact upon the analysis and praxis of European foreign policy.

In his work on “meta-geopolitics”, Al-Rodhan (2009) provides a useful categorisation of material and immaterial features, which co-determine how a space is organised and may potentially be important for the European foreign policy towards that space. These categories include, among others, social and health issues (demography, education, employment, urbanisation, ethnic composition, social cohesion, public health,…), economics (natural resources, infrastructure, poverty,…), environment (pollution, access to clean water and sanitation, vulnerability to climate change,…), or security (military capacity, internal and external security challenges,…). Importantly, these features not only refer to general abstract characteristics
of space, but also include other “everyday life” factors (Tickner, 2003) which may influence the foreign policy of an actor towards that space.

I. Provincializing means acknowledging that European foreign policy analysts and practitioners see the world from within a particular European/Western geographic and spatial setting, involving assumptions about how the rest of the world is or should be organized. The European conceptualisation of space is characterized by what Agnew (1994) labelled as the “territorial trap” (see Polity decentring), including significant importance given to the existence of borders, which can be controlled, managed, or overcome. As there is no room for a systematic analysis of all features included in Al-Rodhan’s categorisation, it may be sufficient in this context to become conscious of some essential features of Europe’s geographic and spatial context (Cole, 2013), which are not to be taken for granted in other spatial contexts. These features include Europe’s relatively small size; the rather “friendly” or easy topography and environmental situation; the concentration of a large number of different countries which are internally rather well organized (e.g. infrastructure and provision of public goods) and connected with each other and other parts of the world.

II. Engagement implies that analysts and practitioners learn about the various spatial and geographic features of other societies, polities, countries or regions, and about the way these features are experienced and perceived there. It implies an awareness that knowledge of these features can be crucial to understand the potential effectiveness and relevance of European foreign policy. A few examples may illustrate this: to what extent was the EU’s policy towards Libya (including the EU’s Integrated Border Assistance Mission) taking into account the country’s exceptional geographic features, consisting largely of desert and with a 4350 km border and coastline of 1770 km? Do practitioners and analysts of European foreign policy take into account the limited relevance of “borders” in the Sahara and Sahel regions? How aware are they that the EU’s call for transparent and democratic elections in the DR Congo is directed to a country half the size of Europe, with limited transportation infrastructure, rather weak administration and a low level of literacy? Or to what extent is the EU, when calling for ambitious greenhouse gas mitigation and investment in renewable energy, taking into account the availability of these alternative natural resources in other regions such as some Middle East. And to what extent are analysts aware of these features when examining the EU’s policy? The same type of questions rise regarding various other aspects included in the categorisation of Al-Rodhan, allowing for a systematic engagement with the spatial features of the areas that are the subject of Europe’s foreign policy.

Disciplinary and methodological decentring

I. To provincialize is ‘to unpack the social scientific categories, assumptions and paradigms that underpin Eurocentric truth claims’ (Fisher Onar & Nicolaidis, 2013: 286). Disciplinary and methodological decentring implies a consciousness that the analysis of Europe’s foreign policy is not only embedded in the research traditions and theoretical perspectives of IR, Political Science, Foreign Policy and EU Studies (Jørgensen, 2015a&b), but is also constrained by these predominantly Western perspectives. Despite their often implicit universal scientific claims, they are in fact rooted in European or Western contexts, ‘the local product of a particular geoepipistemological perspective’ (Waever & Tickner, 2009: 2) and ‘particular, parochial and Eurocentric’ (Buzan & Acharya, 2010: 10). This also explains why they are often ill-equipped for understanding some of the critical issues and challenges facing other parts of the world, which also have an impact on Europe (Bischoff et al., 2016). Moreover, post-positivist perspectives with a larger openness for “difference” – such as Subalter studies, Post-colonial or Post-modernization theories – are but little used in the analysis of European foreign policy.

Provincializing also requires an awareness of the limited receptivity to difference by the predominant research practices and methodological approaches in Political Science, IR and EU Studies. Knowledge accumulation is largely based on and thus also constrained by predominant conceptualisations within the various predominant disciplines. The vast majority of research topics, problems and questions are a
variation on a relatively limited set of themes that dominate European foreign policy literature. Data analysis is also steered by these predominantly Euro- or Western-centric conceptual lenses. The aforementioned NPE concept is a case in point: triggering a very lively debate, it resulted in a massive amount of publications, but only few of them go beyond Eurocentric conceptualizations (Larsen (2014) being one of the exceptions). Chabal and Daloz (2006: 12) make the important argument here that the a priori definition and employment of a conceptual framework – before the actual research – can be detrimental to seeing difference, as ‘such an approach inevitably tends to privilege ethnocentric conceptual frameworks over those that may be argued to be more appropriate for non-Western, or non-industrial societies’. The often universal claim of historically and culturally specific concepts ‘imposes on the discipline a methodology that may not promote the understanding of the deeper political processes at work in many non-Western societies’ (13). This reflects Hudson’s (2007: 188) complaint about the continued use of ‘inappropriate methods, by employing simplifying assumptions that evade the complexity with which the methods cannot cope’. Openness for difference is also hampered by the often (explicit or implicit) positivist approach, the prioritization of explanatory research, and the quest for theory-building (Chabal & Daloz, 2006: 12-13; Thomas & Wilkin, 2006: 247-248). Although the search for causal relations and explanations may in principle be considered as epistemologically superior to descriptive or explorative analysis, a major drawback is the tendency to disregard less documented phenomena, for which data are more difficult to obtain and which are less easily explained (such as religious polities).

The Euro- and Western-centric nature of academic research and the limited receptivity to difference is also reflected in the choice and use of sources. With some exceptions (e.g. the perceptions literature), research on European foreign policy is mainly or solely based on European/Western primary and secondary sources and on interviews with European/Western practitioners, even when the research subject is Europe’s foreign policy towards or relations with other countries or regions (see Linguistic decentring). Academic research on European foreign policy also reflects another feature of IR as a ‘not so international discipline’ (Wæver, 1998): the limited number of publications by non-European/Western scholars, an explanation for and result of the Western- and Eurocentric approach of the discipline (Keuleers et al., 2016). What Shilliam (2011) and Tickner (2013) labelled as imperialist core-periphery power relations in IR, may in this sense also be reflected in scholarship on EU foreign policy.

II. Engagement here largely follows logically from provincializing, providing remedies to the limitations that came to the fore. On a theoretical level, a first step is using and incorporating more insights from the various post-positivist approaches (e.g. Subaltern, Post-colonialist or Post-modern studies) in the analysis of EU foreign policy. Although there might be no “non-Western IR theory” (Buzan & Acharya, 2010; Tickner & Wæver, 2009), Western scholars can actively seek to engage with and learn from conceptualizations offered by scholars in the Arab world, Africa, Asia and other areas – which are not only important for understanding non-Western regions, countries and societies, but also Europe’s foreign policy towards them. They can engage with different readings of core concepts such as democracy, security or sovereignty (see case-studies in Morozov, 2013; Pan, 2012; Tickner & Blaney, 2012), but also with the ones that are less known by most Western scholars (such as guanxi or ubuntu). Engaging with non-Western scholars and literature can help European foreign policy specialists to overcome their narrow Euro- or Western-centric focus, pay attention to a wider set of relevant research problems, and formulate different sets of research questions.

Another step to strengthen engagement is to learn more systematically from other academic disciplines and their approaches and methodologies, also required in view of the complex multidimensional nature of most foreign policy challenges. The need for multi- and inter-disciplinarity goes beyond “traditional” academic disciplines such as Economy, Law or History. Insights from Psychology, Sociology or Anthropology. Philosophy or Religion Studies may be essential to better understand concepts such as guanxi, lichnost, mianzi, al-adala or other phenomena and entities discussed in previous sections. At the heart of disciplinary decentring lies a closer interaction with scholars from within the countries or regions under study, as well as with – already multidisciplinary – country or Area Studies (such as Middle East Studies, Central Asia
Studies or Modern China Studies). Despite area studies being dismissed for their alleged ‘epistemological inferiority’ and despite the challenges to reconcile area studies and social sciences (Teti, 2009; Tickner & Blaney, 2012: 8), this interaction is essential to get deeply needed basic information and to gain an understanding of phenomena that are largely unknown to scholars specialized in European foreign policy. It also requires paying much more attention to descriptive research, running counter to the tendency in Political Science to prioritize explanatory research.

Reaching out to “local” knowledge and empirical work is essential (Kalb, 2006), but not always evident in non-Western contexts (demonstrated in various case-studies in Wæver & Tickner, 2009). Standard research guidelines in political science can prove to be of limited use, if only because of the difficulty to obtain data and use local primary and secondary sources. Methodologies used in disciplines such as Anthropology or Sociology – including field work, (non-)participant observation, or informal interviews – can therefore be needed for data collection and for grounding the analysis in the interpretation of what makes sense within the context of other regions, countries or societies. However, this involves a whole range of specific methodological, ethical, linguistic, financial, organisational and even security challenges, which explains why disciplinary and methodological engagement can be very challenging in practice, even if scholars are fully aware of the necessity (Chabal & Duloz, 2006; Olivier de Sardan, 2015).

Concluding remarks

In this article, we propose an analytical framework to help scholars turn the Decentring Agenda into a Decentred Analytical Praxis, based on six partially overlapping categories (temporal, polity, normative, linguistic, spatial, and disciplinary decentring) and with attention to two of the three dimensions proposed by Fischer Onar and Nicolaïdis (i.e. provincializing and engagement, as a basis for reconstruction). Each category is further divided into subcategories and related points of attention and research questions, which can assist scholars in seeing “difference” and overcoming the predominant Western- and Eurocentric approach in the analysis of Europe’s foreign policy. This final section tackles some concluding theoretical and operational questions. What are the potential fields of application of this analytical framework? How can it be applied in concrete research projects? And what may be the next steps to further develop this framework?

As Jørgensen (2015) emphasizes, the study of European foreign policy is grounded in various partially overlapping research traditions and disciplines – IR, Political Science, Foreign Policy Studies, and European or EU Studies – and can potentially also contribute to these disciplines. The analytical framework for a decentred analytical praxis can be situated at the intersection of these as well, implying that it not only can serve analysts of Europe’s foreign policy, but also those working within one of these fields of research. It helps IR scholars and political scientists pay attention to a wider range of historical trajectories, polities, norms, linguistic frameworks and spatial contexts, and examine how these can influence the international and political realm. The framework may also be used to further develop a decentred analysis of specific thematic issues (e.g. democracy and democratisation). Scholars embedded within Foreign Policy Studies can use the framework to examine to what extent, how and with which result the foreign policy of individual states within Europe (the UK, France, Germany, etc.) and outside Europe (the US, Russia, China, Turkey, etc.) take into account the diversity and complexity of the various decentring categories. Also scholars working within the more actor-oriented sub-field of Foreign Policy Analysis can analyse whether (and which) individual and institutional actors in a specific country are aware of this complexity and whether this awareness impacts upon the decision-making process, the choice of involved actors, the selection of foreign policy instrument, the implementation, etc. European Studies or EU Studies scholars can use the decentring categories to gain a better understanding of the diversity within Europe and differences and similarities between the European situation(s) and these in other parts of the world, allowing thus for a more systematic and richer comparative analysis. This framework can therefore also be used in the context of other country or Area Studies. Reflecting Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis’ (2013: 283) position that a paradigm shift is needed that decentres both the study and praxis of Europe’s international
relations, this operationalization of the Decentring Agenda aims to be of interest not only for scholars but also for diplomats, civil servants and other practitioners involved in foreign policy. This Decentred Analytical Praxis (with the partial exception of the section on disciplinary decentring) can thus not only serve analytical but also prescriptive purposes (Keukeleire, 2014).

How can scholars apply this analytical framework? In view of the complexity and comprehensiveness of the framework and the need to explore often unknown terrain, scholars will generally not be able to tackle decentring in all its dimensions and categories – except through a large interdisciplinary research project. Nevertheless, interesting and innovative research can also be conducted when scholars focus on only one or a few dimensions and categories and their interactions – given the awareness of the wider complexity of the phenomenon(s) the analyses. The aim of the analytical framework is indeed not to plea for all-encompassing research, but rather to contribute to the detection of a wider range of research topics, questions and approaches that can be relevant in the analysis and praxis of foreign policy. The purpose is to contribute to an increased awareness among scholars that understanding the foreign is crucial for our understanding of foreign policy and, next, to provide them with an analytical toolbox that can facilitate a decentred analytical praxis.

What then are next steps in this framework’s development? Whereas this article focused on provincializing and engagement, a following step is to explore how these broader awareness and insights can contribute to reconstruction, being the renewal of ‘EU praxis in a non-European world’ on the basis of ‘mutuality and empowerment’ (Fisher Onar and Nicolaídis 2013: 286). The analytical framework can serve as a basis for a further elaboration, adaptation and sharpening of the various proposed dimensions, (sub)categories and points of attention. Scholars may explore the possibility of additional categories of decentring, such as cultural decentring (now partially included in other categories), gender decentring, and class decentring. The application of the analytical framework in specific case-studies can equally contribute to developing and refining it, allowing us to judge whether it indeed can help us to ‘enable students of global order – and Europe’s place therein – to better grasp the challenges and opportunities of our increasingly non-European and post western order’ (Fisher Onar & Nicolaídis, 2013, 296-297).
References


