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Research Article

## Critical and Problem-Solving Perspectives on Decentring EU External Action Studies

**Sharon Lecocq** *University of Leuven (KU Leuven)*

**Stephan Keukeleire** *University of Leuven (KU Leuven)*

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## Abstract

This article proposes a decentring approach for EU External Action Studies as a debate that is 'disrupting' the mainstream in European Studies. It theoretically contributes to the decentring debate in three ways. First, by identifying decentring as a meta-theoretical current of thinking, the article helps define the decentring debate as an area of theorising which can accommodate scholars from various backgrounds and bring them together around a common commitment to overcome Euro- and Western centrism in scholarship (and practice). Second, the article states the wider relevance of taking a decentring approach, which entails normative and instrumental benefits for scholarship, teaching and practice. By doing so, the article underscores the ethical imperative of disrupting a field of study on the one hand, but also the usefulness and even the necessity of disruption as a problem-solving approach to the benefit of a field's mainstream centre on the other. Third, the article shows how the decentring debate accommodates both critical and problem-solving theorising, and proposes potential theoretical anchors in existing bodies of work. Finally, it discusses the inherent paradox that follows from critical and problem-solving approaches to decentring specifically and disruptive theorising more broadly.

## Keywords

Critical theory; Decentring; EU external action; European foreign policy; Pragmatism; Problem-solving theory

The past decade has seen an increasing call to bring more diversity, and 'dissident voices' into European and EU Studies, warning against introversion and pointing to the need to go beyond 'the mainstream' – i.e. the conventional worldview and assumptions, theories and methods in the field that constitute 'the centre' (Manners and Whitman 2016; Rittberger and Blauburger 2018). The argument is that questioning and disrupting these central assumptions is necessary in order to become more representative and innovate through including different perspectives and insights from outside the dominant centre. The study of the external relations of Europe with the rest of the world has been particularly subject to the criticism of 'navel-gazing' (Keuleers et al. 2016).

Perhaps because of its very focus on Europe's role in a world that is otherwise non-European, scholars particularly question the Eurocentric civilisational and analytical assumptions underlying analyses, urging a decentring of these foundations by lending voice to different geographical (Global South), social (subaltern), but also disciplinary and methodological (e.g. Area Studies, ethnography) perspectives. As such, decentring can take various forms with different implications for scholarship. Imported from its counterpart in International Relations (IR), which calls for diversifying and decentring the study of global affairs (Tickner and Waever 2009; Nayak and Selbin 2010; Acharya 2014; Hurrell 2017; Tickner and Smith 2020), this debate also emerged in European scholarship, criticising Eurocentrism in its various forms (Hobson 2012; Sabaratnam 2013) and arguing for a 'Decentring Agenda' for EU External Action Studies, geared towards finding tools to overcome the identified Euro-, EU- and broader Western centrism in scholarship and practice (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013, 2021; Huber and Kamel 2018; Keukeleire and Lecocq 2018, 2021; Huber and Paciello 2020; Wolff et al. 2022; Zardo and Wolff 2022).

Inevitably, attempts to disrupt the conventions and foundational assumptions of a field's centre encounter scepticism from that very centre, which in the end constitutes the core of what defines a field in the first place, an overhaul of which would endanger its *raison d'être*. For the study of the EU and its external action, these criticisms include the arguments that in the end, European (External Action) Studies as well as EU external action itself primarily derive from an interest in the EU/Europe and EU/European interests – so why spend so much effort on non-European perspectives? Moreover, a better understanding of the external context of the EU and Europe may be useful, but what is a decentring approach, and how to make a theoretical case for its relevance? This article aims to further the decentring agenda by addressing concerns from mainstream EU External Action Studies about the theoretical footing of decentring and the broader relevance of including disruptive perspectives into the study of EU external action.

In this article, we focus on EU External Action Studies as a distinct field of study that is embedded in, yet distinct from, the discipline of International Relations and its subfield Foreign Policy Analysis on the one hand, and European Studies as an area study and its subfield EU studies on the other hand (Jørgensen 2015; Gstöhl and Schunz 2021). Being more all-encompassing than 'European foreign policy' (Keukeleire and Delreux 2022), EU external action refers to 'any form of interaction ... between the European Union, that is, EU institutions and bodies or EU member states acting on behalf of [or with] the EU, and the outside world' (Gstöhl and Schunz 2021: 3). By focusing on EU External Action Studies, this article does not touch upon all manifestations of the decentring agenda in current scholarship, nor does it pretend to discuss comprehensively all areas and fields in which the approach can or should be applied.

Decentring can indeed equally be geared towards recognising differences and centre-periphery relations within the EU and Europe at large. Moreover, as domestic and EU level contestation shape EU external action, the study of the latter equally requires a decentred understanding of Europe itself. Decentring EU external action also requires an acknowledgement that the EU itself is not the product of 'a fascinating kind of 'virgin birth'' (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013: 284) as if it has nothing to do with the colonial and

imperialist past of its member states (Hansen and Jonsson 2014; Nicolaïdis et al. 2015; Pasture 2018; Bhambra 2022). Thus, while the specific focus of this piece is geared towards EU external action specifically, we also acknowledge the importance of the aforementioned dimensions of decentring and argue that some of the arguments made below can be relevant to these related debates.

The article aims to contribute to the decentring debate as follows. First, it identifies decentring as a meta-theoretical current of thinking and area of theorising, which can accommodate scholars from various backgrounds and unite them around a common commitment to overcome Euro- and Western centrism in scholarship (and practice). Second, the article aims to lay out schematically the relevance of a decentring approach, which entails normative and practical benefits for scholarship and practice. Third, by taking this step back and distinguishing the various *purposes* – i.e. critical and problem-solving – of theorising in the first place, the article shows how the decentring debate also reflects these two types of theorising which can find theoretical anchors in existing bodies of work. Finally, the article discusses a paradox that arises from a debate between critical and problem-solving approaches to decentring, which may defy each of the other's initial purpose.

By doing so, the article contributes to this special section by DIMES (Jean Monnet project on Diversity, Inclusion and Multi-Disciplinarity in European Studies) on *Disrupting European Studies*. The article presents the decentring approach to the study of EU external action as a current of thinking that is 'disrupting' the mainstream within this specific field. It underscores both the ethical imperative of such disruption, and the usefulness and even the necessity of disruption as a problem-solving approach to the benefit of a field's mainstream centre. Therefore, the inherent paradox in the decentring debate that is discussed in the article is also more broadly relevant, as it calls for a reflection on the purpose and outcome of disrupting in general and in European Studies specifically.

### **DECENTRING: A META-THEORETICAL CURRENT OF THINKING**

As already set out, by calling into question mainstream assumptions, decentring is geared towards disrupting usually unquestioned conventions. Tickner and Smith argue that the 'act of decentring challenges the alleged existence of a centre from which legitimate knowledge is deemed to originate' (2020: 8). The imperative of decentring has increasingly found uptake in European Studies, especially in the study of EU external action. Significant developments have been made to offer convinced researchers tools for *how* to go about decentring. In particular, Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013, 2021), Keukeleire and Lecocq (2018, 2021), Huber and Paciello (2020) and Wolff et al. (2022) have contributed to providing concrete steps, analytical frameworks and methodological tools to approach research on Europe and its role in the world in a more non-Eurocentric way. However, within the context of mainstream European (External Action) Studies, questions arise about the theoretical case for decentring (Dijkstra and Vanhoonacker 2017) and about the concrete contribution decentring can make to a scholarship that is mainly interested in Europe, the EU itself and its inner workings. Rather than offering additional tools, this article therefore engages in a more fundamental discussion on the definition of the decentring debate and its wider relevance for gaining a better understanding of Europe in the world, and in the end, of Europe itself.

It is useful first to establish what a decentring approach can actually be considered as. Decentring does not constitute a theory in itself, with fixed ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. We propose to consider the decentring approach as a 'current of thinking' (Jørgensen 2017b: 169). Currents of thinking, also referred to as 'turns', constitute debates among communities of researchers that share a commitment or sensitivity to a specific aspect of social and political reality, which in their view should receive more attention than is the case in mainstream theorising. Currents of thought are areas of theorising in the form of pluralist debates orientated towards developing new

insights and conceptual tools to think about global affairs. Scholars interested in decentring agree on and convene around the need for more attention to the non-European in European (External Action) Studies.

A commitment to decentring can stem from normative concerns, displaying a heightened sensitivity to the importance of self-reflexivity and emancipating the subaltern, and to criticising socio-political narratives and practices that perpetuate uneven power relations. However, not only normative concerns drive researchers to decentring, but also concrete theoretical and empirical academic and policy concerns. 'Centrism' is also increasingly equated to 'myopia', leading to a range of biases, misunderstandings and a limited view of reality – for example, by assuming the predominance and universal validity and applicability of European and Western conceptions of modernity and progress, within and beyond Europe. From a 'functional' point of view, a decentred perspective is thus not only about disrupting, but about strengthening one's own knowledge through broadening one's perspective. Moreover, an increasing interest in learning about 'the other' has also coincided with real-world power shifts that put the non-European more front and centre than ever (Zarakol 2019).


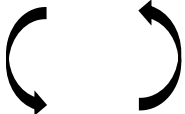
As such, decentring can be seen as both a normative and pragmatic imperative in the study and practice of international relations (Acharya and Buzan 2019: 299) and European external action (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013: 285). Within a current of thinking, the content of the discussion and the form research takes may be similar. Thus, scholars can enter the debate from very different points of departure, including different philosophical points of view. Decentring as a meta-theoretical current of thinking transcends specific theoretical inclinations, meaning that decentring can be grafted onto various new and existing theoretical lenses. The two different approaches to decentring briefly outlined above, i.e. driven by normative or practical concerns, will be discussed throughout the following sections and will form the basis for offering existing theoretical anchors and for discussing the compatibility of approaches and potential paradox inherent to the debate.

### **THE RELEVANCE OF A DECENTRING APPROACH FOR EU EXTERNAL ACTION STUDIES (AND PRACTICE)**

If Eurocentrism only entails a focus on Europe and endowing Europe with some exceptional qualities, then Eurocentrism in the study of Europe and EU external action is essentially not surprising, nor necessarily problematic. On the one hand, it is 'not particularly exceptional to think in terms of exceptionalism' (Jørgensen 2017a: 286) and it is therefore natural to accord a measure of evidence to one's own worldview as a researcher or practitioner raised and trained within 'the Eurocentric box' (Friedman 2015). On the other hand, the field of European/EU Studies is geared towards a focus on Europe and the EU itself, the intricacies of which warrant entire fields of study. The Eurocentrism in the study of EU external action also stems from the field's roots in the IR discipline (and its subfield foreign policy analysis) and European Studies (and its subfield EU Studies) as an area study (Jørgensen 2015; Gstöhl and Schunz 2021).

Eurocentrism becomes problematic, however, when European universalist and civilisational pretensions are used as a basis for studying Europe's place in the world (Hobson 2012; Sabaratnam 2013). In this sense, the same normative and practical concerns that are raised in the IR discipline apply: Eurocentrism 'undermine[s] the intellectual claim and moral purchase of a discipline that aspires to understand international politics' (Grovoqui 2002: 52 in Bilgin 2016: 136). This section attempts to lay out the usefulness of decentring as an approach that disrupts the Eurocentric foundations of EU External Action Studies, identifying concrete empirical and normative benefits and relevance for both the scholarship and practice of EU external action – schematically presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Wider relevance of the decentring approach**

	<b>Scholarship</b> Strengthening analytical capacities in EU External Action Studies	 <b>Practice</b> Improving EU external action
<b>Normative / ethical</b>  <b>Functional / instrumental</b>	Inclusiveness and plurality Mutuality and genuine dialogue / multilogue  Description Understanding Explaining Theory-building	Overcoming colonial burden through mutuality and genuine dialogue / multilogue  Relevance Efficiency Effectiveness Pre-emptive action

**Relevance for Scholarship**

In line with calls for decentring and globalising the IR discipline, the idea of decentring was introduced in EU External Action Studies mainly in view of *normative, moral or ethical reasons* – aiming for a more inclusive scholarship and for pluralising and decolonising the study of Europe in global affairs. The argument for decentring pertains to a sense of injustice regarding core-periphery relations that have not only characterised world politics, but also the production of knowledge about the world and within Europe in particular. Eurocentrism leads to making conscious and unconscious research choices that perpetuate uneven power relations and research practices that oppress critical and dissident thinking. For example, Sabaratnam (2013: 263-264) explains how Western interventions are generally studied from the perspective of the intervener, which not only reflects the ‘habits of intellectual Eurocentrism’ and ‘underlying ontological premises ... emphasizing ‘Western’ agency as the terrain of the political’ but also ‘helps to reproduce, however unintentionally, the background assumption that that which is exterior to this does not matter for an appreciation of the politics of intervention’.

Aside from the actual content of the research, inclusiveness and plurality are also called for within communities of researchers, as a broader normative concern equally considers the expression of uneven power relations in academia and in teaching at universities (de Sousa Santos et al. 2016; Bhambra et al. 2018; Cupples and Grosfogue 2019; de Sousa Santos 2019). This growing concern has also coincided with worldwide calls for decolonising universities and public spaces through protests and in the form of, for instance, the symbolic removal of imperialists’ statues – examples of which are the South African student protest movement ‘Rhodes must fall’ (Kwoba et al. 2018), the broader ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement and a ‘woke’ call for heightened awareness of social injustice in all areas of society, including academia and education. Decentring is thus also relevant for *teaching* in the field of European External Action Studies, providing inspiration for innovative teaching on European (foreign) affairs (Maurer et al. 2020). It can contribute to what Oloruntoba et al. (2021: 179) advocate as ‘a relevant and balanced curriculum of European Studies’ that non-European as well as European teachers and learners can embrace.

Other than normative or ethical concerns, decentring can address *functional/instrumental concerns* in EU External Action Studies. Innovative descriptive and explorative analyses into the external context of European foreign policy are necessary for understanding the new realities with which Europe is confronted and the local contexts towards which EU external action is projected. A lack of such understanding, to a major extent attributed to Eurocentrism and an unwillingness for real engagement with local external contexts by scholars, has led to questions about whether EU External Action Studies – with its

conventional assumptions and theories – is actually up to the challenge of fully grasping the EU's role and the (in)effectiveness and (ir)relevance of its policies in an increasingly complex and volatile 'non-European world' (Keuleers et al. 2016; Keukeleire and Lecocq 2021).

Rich empirical material is not only required for better description and understanding, it is necessary to move to the next analytical stages, that is improving and updating conceptual and explanatory models. Decentring helps to shed light on previously neglected or unknown factors and processes that can help explain the external (in)effectiveness, (ir)relevance, and (lack of) legitimacy of Europe and the EU in the world. In this sense, new data do not only provide a fertile base for testing existing hypotheses and theories, but also for asking new research questions, detecting new relationships and causal mechanisms that can contribute to further theory-building. For example, concepts such as Normative Power Europe, when applied in EU-Africa or EU-MENA relations in a decentred way (Staeger 2016; Huber et al. 2017; Keukeleire et al. 2021) can assume a very different meaning and evaluation, and studies into local contexts can expose factors explaining successes and failures in those relations. On EU-Africa relations, Bourgeois et al. (2020: 8-9) point to 'the legitimacy of a plurality of perspectives, which challenges existing Eurocentric biases' proposing that 'research is not driven anymore by the search for an absolute truth but by the unveiling of the different aspects of a situation seen from these different perspectives.'

Decentring thereby not only relates to the rich empirical realities that are present outside the conventional Eurocentric centre. Decentring requires including and starting from different worldviews, theories and approaches to understand and explain the world, which can also provide insights and explanations for Europe's position in the world. Examples include African (Ngcoya 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018) Asian (Qin 2018; Shih et al. 2019; deSouza 2020) and various other Global South (Tickner and Blaney 2013; Acharya 2014; Aydinli and Biltekin 2018) as well as other non-Western perspectives and schools of thought (Ling 2014; Sheikh 2016; Shahi 2020). In this context, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018: 6) emphasises the importance of 'a decolonial epistemological move of decentring the Global North as the centre of knowledge and recentring the Global South'. The author argues for 'an intellectual and academic process of centring of Africa as a legitimate historical unit of analysis and epistemic site from which to interpret the world while at the same time globalizing knowledge from Africa' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 4). Turning to EU External Action Studies, epistemic sites and knowledge from the Global South thus constitute a basis for interpreting and analysing EU external action and Europe's position in the world.

### Relevance for Practice

While our focus here is mainly on EU External Action *Studies*, it is worth pointing to the policy relevance of decentring and to the intertwinement of scholarship and practice. Decentring may equally inform the *practice* of European external relations and politics, again from both an instrumental and normative point of view. On an *instrumental* level, a decentred approach holds the potential of strengthening EU external action through developing a stronger knowledge base and deeper understanding and situational awareness of the external context in which the EU operates (cf. European External Action Service 2015; 2016). Policies generated through decentred analyses can diminish the chance that the EU is caught by surprise or misjudges its own involvement due to a lack of such knowledge and awareness. Concrete examples entail the failure of the European Neighbourhood Policy and of the EU's policies towards Africa, which have been explicitly related to a Eurocentric approach and to the disregard of Mediterranean and African agency and contexts (Schumacher and Bouris 2017; Kotsopoulos and Mattheis 2018; Del Sarto and Tholens 2020; Haastrup et al. 2020; Teti et al. 2020). In turn, decentring can contribute to a more relevant and effective foreign policy when it is tailored to benefit local contexts - as interpreted by local agents - as well as the EU's interests (Keukeleire and

Lecocq 2021). This reframing of the EU's interests into 'other-regarding interests' (George and Keohane 1980: 221) may mean that a more effective EU foreign policy does not necessarily entail more Eurocentrism.

*Ethical* drivers for decentring the practice of EU external action can be a willingness on the part of foreign policy makers and diplomats to engage in genuine dialogue/multilogue and seriously listen to and learn from their interlocutors as a matter of mutual respect and equality. On an ethical level, 'ignoring the point of view of the EU's counterparts is problematic, as they are major stakeholders of the EU policies' (Keuleers et al. 2016: 360). This imperative is particularly pressing in view of coping with the burden of EU member states' colonial and imperialist pasts, and in view of allegations against the EU about taking a civilisational tone and conveniently 'forgetting' its exploitative history (Hansen & Jonsson 2014; Nicolaidis et al. 2015; Pasture 2018; Sebhatu 2020). Moral considerations can be a motivation to decentre in order to signal recognition, humility and mutuality. As such, decentring can help dealing with what Nshimbi (2020) sees in EU-Africa relations as the overarching challenge in the partnership, that is 'finding common ground and levelling the playing field'. This way, decentring could counter the EU's inclination towards 'continuously devising ways to maintain its dominance in the 'partnership''. Decentring can also contribute to overcoming the underlying Eurocentric, modernist and colonial paradigm of specific domains of EU external action, such as EU development policy, and contribute to 'a better acknowledgement of the diversity or 'pluriverse' of alternatives to 'development'' (Delputte & Orbie 2020: 249).

Important to note here is that the analysis and practice of EU external action are more interrelated and mutually constitutive than is often acknowledged. In other words, decentred analyses can lead to policy recommendations to improve and strengthen EU external action, while a decentred policy practice may broaden the scope for decentred analyses within mainstream EU External Action Studies. Likewise, the difference between ethical and instrumental imperatives to decentre may not be as clear-cut, given that moral incentives can lead to practical benefits when scholarship or policies end up more efficient and effective by gaining more legitimacy. However, just as disrupting a field of study can help in strengthening that scholarship, decentring can (intentionally or unintentionally) serve to preserve, and ultimately even reinforce, the power positions both of European/Western academic and political actors. A paradox then arises, when decentring based on ethical incentives perpetuates the dominance of the EU and the Western centres through strengthening their scholarly or real-world position. This paradox is also discussed in the next section and derives from the approach's compatibility with both critical and problem-solving theorising.

## **DECENTRING AND DISRUPTING: CRITICAL VERSUS PROBLEM-SOLVING APPROACHES**

As a meta-theoretical current of thinking aimed at disrupting the field of EU External Action Studies, we argue that a decentring approach can be both critical and problem-solving. In the famous words of Cox (1981: 128-129): 'Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose' and theorising can be pursued for two purposes which broadly align with the above normative and instrumental objectives that may give impetus for decentring. As a point of departure for theoretically discussing the decentring approach, we rely on the distinction made by Cox (1981) between critical and problem-solving theorising. It is argued that, depending on a critical or problem-solving stance, researchers may find theoretical anchors in different existing bodies of work outside of European Studies.

### **Critical and Problem-solving Theorising**

According to Cox (1981), theory can serve two purposes and take two kinds of shapes: critical theorising and problem-solving theorising. Critical theorising 'begins with the avowed intent of criticizing particular social arrangements and/or outcomes [...] it explicitly



sets out to identify and criticize a particular set of social circumstances and demonstrate how they came to exist' (Kurki & Wight 2007: 28). A critical theorist claims to step outside of the prevailing world order, pick apart existing frameworks focusing on broader socio-political institutions and power-relations they represent, and aims to overhaul and reconstruct them based on a certain *problematique*. Critical theorising is also an ongoing effort, as it 'does not take institutions and social power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing' and therefore 'must continually adjust its concepts to the changing object it seeks to understand and explain' (Cox 1981: 129).

Problem-solving theorising takes existing institutions and power relations as parameters for investigation and tries to change things within the existing order. While this second type of theorising can equally take on a reflexive, critical and normative angle, its aim is more 'practical'. Rather than reconstructing from zero, problem-solving aims to change and adapt (perhaps also fundamentally) existing institutions and power relations and make them 'work [more] smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble' in scholarship and international politics (Cox 1981: 128-129). Problem-solving perspectives equally depart from a reality that is acknowledged to be complex, yet conveniently presuppose an artificial measure of 'fixedness' to the world.

Critical and problem-solving theorising exhibit distinct strengths and weaknesses as specific types of theorising that aspire to a disruption of existing structures, both in the scholarship and in the practice of international politics. The critical perspective is the most fundamental, self-reflective in terms of historical awareness, and aims for a true overhaul of existing structures based on an aspect of reality that is the source of criticism – such as the eradication of Eurocentric foundations of scholarship and practice. The issue with radical critical perspectives, however, is that through its concern with 'what ought to be', there can be an unwillingness or inability to work with or construct on 'what is', aside from criticising it (cf. 'boundary of negativity', Wæver 1996). Rather than providing concrete options or solutions for change that can readily be applied by mainstream thinkers, there is a danger of lingering in a circle of criticism related to what can be considered utopian or 'unrealistic expectations' (Kurki & Wight 2007: 28).

In comparison to critical theorising, a problem-solving approach can be considered less radical in terms of disrupting an existing field of study, but therefore perhaps also more appealing to mainstream thinkers, as problem-solving theory explicitly aims to provide applicable solutions. In the end, subtle disruptions can be more effective in the short term, and become larger in the long term through a slower process of 'conviction'. However, this approach can also be considered as not radical enough and even damaging to the cause of disrupting. According to Cox (1981: 129-130), the willingness to work within existing power structures and conventional theories is a weakness, as presuming a measure of 'fixedness' is a false premise and ideologically problematic:

problem-solving theory, however, rests upon a false premise, since the social and political order is not fixed but (at least in a long-range perspective) is changing. Problem-solving theories can be represented, in the broader perspective of critical theory, as serving particular national, sectional, or class interests, which are comfortable within the given order.

In sum, critical and problem-solving theorising can be considered distinct approaches to research with distinct advantages and disadvantages in terms of transformative potential to a field.

### **Critical and Problem-solving Approaches to Decentering EU External Action Studies**

These approaches are reflected in the formulation of a 'Decentering Agenda' for the analysis of EU external action. This agenda, initially proposed by Fisher Onar and Nicolaidis (2013),

presents three steps for overcoming Eurocentrism, including *provincialising* (implying self-reflection and unpacking the particularistic nature of (different) European experiences, accounts and assumptions, often presented as universal), *engagement* with others' worldviews (in relation to Europe or not), leading to a *reconstruction* or re-imagining of European agency based on mutuality and humility. Elsewhere (Keukeleire & Lecocq 2018), we have developed these dimensions and aimed for operationalisation with a number of categories along which differences in worldviews can be detected (including various temporal, spatial, polity, normative, linguistic and disciplinary perspectives). In addition, we proposed to rethink these steps – provincialising, engagement and reconstruction – in view of their practical application in research and practice. We explicitly pointed to the importance of distinguishing between 'the Decentring Agenda as an analytical or heuristic tool on the one hand, and as a normative judgement on the other' (ibid: 280). This does not mean research is neutral (cf. Cox), but rather that individual scholars should try not to make a priori normative judgements and to be open to perspectives which may appear alien or unacceptable from the researcher's point of view. The aim is 'to assist scholars in detecting, labelling and understanding concepts, ideas and practices that do not fit within their usual frames of reference' (ibid: 280).

Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis start their argument for decentring EU external action from a normative point of view and from a critical and post-colonial background – denouncing the Eurocentrism in European Studies with reference to 'echoes of empire' and an incomplete process of decolonisation that privileges Europe and the 'west' over the 'rest' in reality and in academia (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013, 2021; Nicolaïdis et al. 2015) – although they also point to the analytical challenges of and empirical need for taking a decentring perspective more broadly. We entered the decentring debate from a different point of departure that stems from within 'the mainstream' and from the realisation that the conventional Eurocentric tools with which most scholars work appear insufficient to empirically and analytically grasp Europe's place in the world (Keukeleire and Lecocq 2018). Although this difference is subtle and would not matter for engaging in constructive dialogue, ultimately, these two points of departure may result in differing research objectives and outcomes that may seem contradictory.

Building upon the 'decentring agenda' (Lecocq & Keukeleire 2018; Keukeleire et al. 2021; Keukeleire & Lecocq 2021), we also pointed to potential misunderstandings, concerns or resistance to decentring by mainstream scholars and practitioners. For example, the formulation of engagement in both academic and policy circles may be obfuscated with endorsement or legitimisation of other perspectives (which may be considered as unethical or unacceptable), whereas 'learning' about and from counterparts' different perspectives is more permissible. Similarly, a full 're-construction' of European Studies 'from the outside in' raises questions about the feasibility and tractability to start rebuilding scholarship and policy from zero and on the basis of radically different foundations – even if this would ultimately be the most desirable outcome. Referring to 'recalibration' rather than reconstruction reflects an acknowledgement that scholars and practitioners are rarely open to completely starting anew. It emphasises larger potential for actual change and adaptation, including by mainstream scholars and practitioners.

These nuances mirror a distinction between a critical and problem-solving perspective. Both put forward the importance of reflexivity and including worldviews from different geographical and social perspectives, yet enter the decentring debate from different angles and in different ways – i.e. from outside and from within – but also to different extents. In this sense, it is the critical and post-colonial perspective that prescribes a true overhaul of scholarship and policy based on non-Eurocentric foundations, while the problem-solving perspective holds that decentring can be compatible even with existing frameworks to various degrees.

## Pragmatism as a Theoretical Anchor for Problem-solving Decentring in EU External Action Studies

For sure, the two approaches are complementary and mutually constitutive in the decentring current of thinking. Yet, their start from distinct 'purposes' implies that they can be couched in different theoretical perspectives. Evidently, scholars preoccupied with the normative imperative of decentring can find a useful anchor in critical and postcolonial bodies of work, which have a long legacy of exposing the Euro- and Western centrism in scholarship and politics with the aim to fundamentally reimagine academia and the world on a different basis. Dominant Euro- and Western centric approaches such as positivism, and theories like realism and liberal institutionalism, are shown to fall short of capturing reality, and alternatives and new approaches are presented from outside mainstream IR (e.g. Fisher-Onar 2020). However, problem-solving orientated scholars, concerned about the analytical capacity of existing frameworks to adequately grasp the empirical reality of Europe in the world, may not seek to do away with their theories, but find ways to work with them, improve them and make them more applicable to real-world problems at hand. Where a critical approach for decentring European foreign policy analysis finds an established theoretical lens in Critical Studies, including post-colonialism, feminism, and Marxism, it is less clear where problem-solving theorising may find a foothold.

This article argues that a problem-solving perspective on decentring could look towards Pragmatism for developing its theoretical foundations, for concrete guidance in terms of research design and for adapting/improving existing real-world structures and scholarship. Pragmatic research is inherently problem-solving. It starts from real-world observations and puzzles and aims to 'understand complex social phenomena and/or to explain observed social regularities' – phenomena 'that previously escaped our cognitive or operational parameters' (Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009: 706, 716). Starting from the complexity of social reality, it assumes that no single theoretical paradigm is able to capture this reality in all its facets. Rather than overhauling existing paradigms, however, it combines useful elements of different paradigms in new ways (cf. 'analytical eclecticism', Sil and Katzenstein 2010; or 'comparative area studies', Ahram et al. 2018). For example, Darwich (2018: 6) notes how eclectic and middle-range analytical frameworks that combine insights from several traditional paradigms may 'account for the complexity of international life in the [MENA] region that no single research tradition can', for instance by including insights from Area Studies on region-specific issues. Hence, Pragmatism developed its own peculiar meta-theoretical stance, which is characterised by ontological agnosticism, epistemological instrumentalism, abduction as a preferred methodology, and a distinct emphasis on practice as a level of analysis (Hellmann 2009; Franke and Weber 2012; Delputte and Orbie 2018).

Pragmatism points to the perils of 'paradigm mentalities' (Walker 2010) which limit scholars' analytical abilities by predetermining which (aspects of) realities are even worth scrutinising (Sil and Katzenstein 2010). This prevents scholars from observing and investigating beyond the 'straitjacket' of theoretical lenses and widens the gap between academia and policy relevant research. This does not imply that Pragmatism rejects existing theoretical work and the useful insights it generates. Much to the contrary, a pluralist disposition encourages pragmatists to start research from a broad knowledge base of existing fields of inquiry, including Eurocentric ones, as these are also available tools for seeing the complexity of research problems and suggesting useful explanations. The preferred methodology of pragmatists is an *abductive* research strategy which travels between empirical observations and different existing frameworks containing various elements (theories, concepts, analytical tools) which can be employed and combined in order to make sense of puzzling observations (Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015).

Pragmatism is highly self-reflexive, as it departs from the acknowledgement that researchers never embark upon a project from a blank page, but bring their own

background and assumptions into the research from the start even when one *tries* to move beyond them, be it related to theoretical or ethnocentric predispositions. Conventional Pragmatism, however, in the form of theoretical pluralism or analytic eclecticism, has been criticised for its tendency to overlook ethical concerns regarding inclusivity. If inter-paradigmatic dialogue remains confined to interaction among the dominant paradigms, it would generate only a partial pluralism that forgoes its claim to inclusivity and emancipatory potential by reifying existing power dynamics (Blanchard 2020; Peet 2020). Similarly, and in line with decentring, Eun (2018: 9-11) explains that more inclusivity is needed not only across theoretical boundaries but also among social and spatial divides, as a focus only on the former would continue to rest upon existing Euro/Western-centric paradigms. A pragmatic or problem-solving approach to decentring would therefore include non-Eurocentric knowledge, without necessarily discarding existing Eurocentric knowledge.

### **THE DECENTRING/DISRUPTING PARADOX**

The following section discusses the inherent paradox that follows from accommodating both critical and problem-solving approaches in a debate on decentring EU External Action Studies. This paradox has been hinted at in the previous sections, and results from the different purposes with which scholars can enter the debate. Some scholars start from criticising the Eurocentric foundations of the study of Europe's international relations, take a critical approach to further theorising in the field and require inclusivity through decentring mainly from a normative perspective. Other scholars start from criticising the diminished problem-solving capacities of existing frameworks and assumptions in the study of EU external action and find Eurocentrism to be problematic on that account. The latter take a problem-solving approach to further theorising in the field and require inclusivity through decentring mainly from an instrumental perspective.

The critical perspective on decentring is the most fundamental, self-reflective and historically aware, aiming for a thorough overhaul of existing structures in the field of EU external action (studies) and based on non-Eurocentric foundations of scholarship and practice. A true disruption of a field – in terms of shaking its Eurocentric foundations – may therefore at first view require critical theorising. The large body of existing work in the post-positivist and post-colonial tradition of IR can serve as a foothold for scholars wishing to study Europe's role in the world from a non-Eurocentric perspective. However, critical perspectives are also criticised for their 'enduringly Eurocentric gaze' resulting in 'avatars of Eurocentrism' in critical and postcolonial approaches (Sabaratnam 2013; Hobson and Sajed 2020; Murray 2020; Toley 2021; Pison Hindawi 2022). As critical theorists call for a fundamental rethinking of the frameworks and assumptions that mainstream scholars have been using, the latter may be more deterred from than enticed to consider a decentring approach. This may perpetuate the talking past each other of the critical and the mainstream, leading to less disruption than would be expected. In short, critical perspectives can paradoxically lead to a perpetuation of what they want to disturb and disrupt.

That being the case, a problem-solving approach can also be conducive in terms of making real changes and convincing also mainstream thinkers to try and adopt a decentring approach or join the debate and current of thinking. A problem-solving approach such as pragmatism leaves room for incorporating and adapting existing frames of reference based on inclusion. It can thus ultimately and paradoxically have a larger impact, as it may (also for simply functional reasons) reach an extensive academic audience from scholars representing a wide range of theoretical thought. A problem-solving perspective can also constitute a more humble and 'realistic' stance for some researchers, in the sense of *trying* to move beyond their own background and assumptions, which may never fully be possible. We speak from such a humble position, as we are *trying* to move past the Eurocentric bubble in which we were socially and academically reared.

Nevertheless, there is a need to acknowledge that a problem-solving approach may ultimately defy the initial emancipatory objective of decentring and disrupting. Rather than doing away with existing frameworks, it aims to strengthen the effectiveness and legitimacy of EU External Action Studies and practice by addressing the lack of knowledge of the EU's external context and the negative consequences of Europe's actions beyond its borders. A problem-solving approach does not start from an intention to be disruptive, but in a sense can be seen as rescuing the 'centre' – the opposite intention of critical theorising. This more 'light', 'thin' or less fundamental form of decentring thereby runs the risk of not only perpetuating, but even legitimising centre-periphery relations – even if this is not the aim.

As with the distinction between the normative and instrumental relevance of decentring, the distinction between critical and problem-solving theorising is not always clear. Researchers can be driven as much by ethical concerns for being more inclusive as by making existing scholarship and frameworks more effective. There may be a wide spectrum as to where a researcher is situated in terms of the intentions with which one enters the debate, the extent to which one engages in it and the preferred process and outcome of doing so. There might also be an argument for various degrees of decentring, in which modest attempts at disrupting may be seen as a step into the direction of more fundamental change, rather than merely reifying existing power structures. For instance, entering new empirical insights from external contexts into (the analysis of) EU external action may not have the objective to disrupt, but can do so by exposing new theoretical and policy questions that may trigger rethinking foundational assumptions about the presumed universalism of European accounts.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article introduced the decentring approach for EU External Action Studies as a debate that is 'disrupting' the mainstream in European Studies. While it does not touch upon all manifestations of the decentring agenda in current scholarship, nor comprehensively discusses all potential applications of the approach, the article theoretically contributes to the wider decentring debate in three ways. First, by identifying decentring as a meta-theoretical current of thinking, it helps define the decentring debate as an area of theorising which can bring together scholars around a common commitment to overcome Euro- and Western centrism in scholarship (and practice). Second, the article underscores the wider relevance of taking a decentring approach, schematically presented as having normative and practical benefits for scholarship and practice. Third, the article shows how the decentring debate accommodates both critical and problem-solving perspectives on theorising and proposes potential theoretical anchors in existing bodies of work.

In addition, the article discusses the inherent paradox that arises in the decentring debate through accommodating both critical and problem-solving approaches to theorising. It argues that critical and problem-solving approaches to theorising have distinct advantages in the function of disrupting and innovating a field of study. While critical theorising has a clear normative agenda and stronger disruptive intention in terms of altering a field (i.e. uprooting and changing the Eurocentric foundations of scholarship and practice), problem-solving approaches can be disruptive in view of adapting and improving existing frameworks (i.e. recalibrating existing scholarship and policy to make them less Eurocentric). The paradox entails that, while critical theorising holds the most disruptive potential in terms of depth, its academic reach may be more limited by remaining confined to the critical. Problem-solving approaches are more readily tailored to also accommodate mainstream Eurocentric thinkers, and despite being less disruptive in purpose, their reach may provoke broader change.

It is important to note that this article, for the sake of clarity, includes several binary distinctions that may not be as clear or exist in reality. Researchers can be driven both by ethical concerns about inclusivity and the desire to strive for building more effective and

efficient scholarship and frameworks; and theorising can contain both critical and problem-solving elements. The article underscores the ethical imperative of disruption on the one hand, and the usefulness and even the necessity of disruption as a problem-solving approach to the benefit of a field's mainstream centre on the other hand. Even more, the argument lies in the fact that, rather than being at opposite ends of a debate, different perspectives are complementary within a current of thinking and they need each other, both in view of innovating a field of study and in view of policy relevance.

## AUTHOR DETAILS

Sharon Lecocq, University of Leuven (KU Leuven), Leuven Institute for International and European Studies (LINES), Parkstraat 45, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium.  
[sharon.lecocq@kuleuven.be]

Stephan Keukeleire, University of Leuven (KU Leuven), Leuven Institute for International and European Studies (LINES), Parkstraat 45, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium.  
[stephan.keukeleire@kuleuven.be]

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