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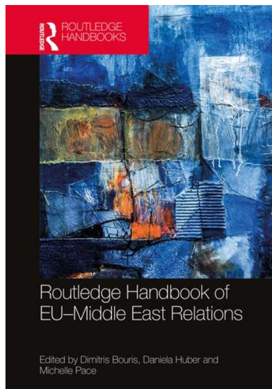

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A postcolonial critique of EU–Middle East relations

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5
A POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE OF EU–MIDDLE EAST RELATIONS

Somdeep Sen

Introduction

This contribution presents a postcolonial critique of EU–Middle East relations. There are, of course, a multiplicity of facets to the European Union's (EU) role in the Middle East. This was evident in the Barcelona Declaration's conception of the relations between the EU and the countries in the Middle East and North Africa, as it identified political and security partnerships, economic and financial partnerships as well as partnerships in social, cultural and human affairs as means of formalising the links between the two regions that have been "forged by neighbourhood and history" (European Union, 1995: 2). Expectedly then, academic works on EU–Middle East relations have been similarly concerned with the EU's economic impact in the region (Dennis, 2006; Nonneman, 2006), its role in regional politics (Abbott, 2018; Dunne and Youngs, 2017; van Hüllen, 2015) and its security/stability-oriented engagement in the Middle East (Dandashly, 2018; Durac, 2018; Pierini, 2016). In this sense, its multifaceted role in the Middle East provides for a "good case" for deliberating the nature of the EU's external relations and the extent and limits of its role in international politics (Pace, 2006; Pace and Seeberg, 2010; Youngs, 2014).

Yet, this postcolonial critique is less concerned with the materiality of the EU's role in the Middle East. Instead, it is focused on the discursive and material hierarchies that shape the EU's external relations in the region. In this sense, this contribution follows studies that have critically engaged with the EU's self-perception as a normative actor and a "force for good" in international politics (Aggestam, 2008; Manners, 2002; Pace, 2007a, 2007b). However, as a *postcolonial* critique of EU–Middle East relations, it conceives this self-perception – as an embodiment (and propagator) of normative values – to be an outgrowth of Europe's colonial legacies. For one thing, this chapter argues, this self-perception is a product of hierarchies between the Global North – the location of the coloniser – and the Global South – the "home" of the colonised – that were established under the guise of European empires. These same hierarchies went on to shape the establishment of the EU. However, these colonial hierarchies are not just a matter of history. And, just as the term "postcolonial" carries with it the "colonial", so too do the historical, colonial hierarchies continue to accompany the contemporary nature of the EU's external relations, in its engagement with the Middle East. This contribution thus begins with a discussion of the history of European colonial exploits and the manner in which the interests of the

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metropolitan powers came to define the foundations of the EU. Subsequently, it demonstrates the way in which these (colonial) logics and practices of the past have remained intact and define present-day EU–Middle East relations.

The EU and its colonial roots

The legacies of colonial rule are very much inscribed into the foundations of the international political system – particularly, in terms of the hierarchies between the colonised and the colonisers that were inherent to the colonial endeavour. The persistence of these legacies is evident at a discursive level; particularly in the way the international political order is imagined. For instance, the notion of political modernity is deeply embossed with European intellectual traditions (Escobar, 2007). And, concepts like "citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice [and] scientific rationality" are a direct outgrowth of European Enlightenment (Chakrabarty, 2000: 4). Yet it was the vehicle of colonialism that ensured that this "brand" of European political modernity found global resonance, especially in the territories of the (former) colonies. And, Western experience of modernity and understandings of "what it means to be modern" – be it in terms of institutions or discourses – came to define the formation of modernity in the Global South (Bhambra, 2007: 4). European concepts of "the state, bureaucracy and capitalist enterprise" that were once preached at (but denied to) colonised populations inhabiting diverse contexts are foundational to the development of political systems in the Global South in the era of the postcolonial state (ibid.: p. 4; see also Hansen and Stepputat, 2001; Young, 2012). Further, European (enlightenment) intellectuality also went on to shape indigenous political thought and animated the ideologies of reformers like the founder of the Brahmo Samaj[1] Raja Ram Mohan Roy as well as revolutionary, anti-colonial intellectuals like Frantz Fanon, Hishem Djait and Manabendra Nath Roy (Chakrabarty, 2000: 4–5).

The globality of European conceptions of political modernity meant it became difficult for non-European conceptions of modernity to proliferate (Seth, 2016: 386). Moreover, it established an intellectual hierarchy that, drawing on colonial legacies, awards a certain centrality to European political thought (Acharya and Buzan, 2017: 342) and assumes a synonymy between what is (or should be) the nature of the international political order and European conceptions of modernity (Trevor-Roper, 1965; Landes, 1999). Of course, the domination of the Global North in the international political system, established under auspices of colonial rule, is not just a matter of discourse. It is equally material and deeply impacts the materiality of the institutions and structures of the international political system. This materiality is evident in view of Edward Said's *Orientalism* whereby, in the coloniser's discourse, the "Orient" was constructed as a place of "strangeness", "difference" and "exotic sensualism" (Said, 1979: 72). This conception of the "Orient" now informs the core logics of the global "War on Terror" and its securitised characterisation of the Muslim world (Powell, 2011; Morton, 2007). Similarly, the global proliferation of neoliberal economies buttressed by the "development of new financial instruments" replicates European expansions in Africa and the Middle East of the 1880s. These new financial instruments are now the means of facilitating "unequal [economic] exchange[s]" in the same way "new economic spaces" in the colonies were appropriated by colonial powers in order to extract the raw materials needed for the industrialisation of the metropole (Venn, 2009: 210). Finally, for the material consequences of colonialism on the international political order, we could also look to the way (colonial) hierarchies are inscribed into international law. Expectedly, much of the colonial political economy mentioned was buoyed by a legal framework that

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allowed for the acquisition of new economic spaces. In this sense, the early (colonial) roots of international legal frameworks ensured that the "centre of gravity" in these laws is "firmly European". And, just as these legal frameworks once justified the colonial endeavour, they also codified (into law) the colonial hierarchies into the "disciplinary structures" of the international political system. This affected the way in which sovereign postcolonial states interacted with the former colonisers in international politics (Craven, 2012: 863). Moreover, it created parameters of determining the (il)legitimacy of politics (and resistance) in the Global South that were largely conceived in view of the interests and perceptions of the political elite in the Global North (Rajagopal, 2003: 9–10).

The legacies of colonial rule are equally embedded in the foundations of the EU, especially in the core logics of its engagement in international politics. The 1975 Lomé Convention, for instance, was an "elaborate regime" of rules, regulations and agreements that were meant to formalise relations between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP) (Brown, 2002: 1). It was often considered the "apex of a 'pyramid' of EU agreements with developing countries" and "set the tone" for a wide variety of cooperation agreements between the EU and countries in Asia, Latin American and the Middle East. Ostensibly, the Convention endeavours to "manage the transition of a colonial relationship to a post-colonial one" (ibid.: 2). The European Commission was insistent in its claim that the Convention is all but "a joint agreement between sovereign states on the basis of equality with the aim of furthering the development of the ACP states" (ibid.: 3–4). Underlining a certain equality in the relationship between the EU and ACP countries, Article 4 of the Convention thus reads, "In support of the development strategies of the ACP States, due account shall be taken of the objectives and priorities of the Community's cooperation policy and the ACP States' development policies and priorities" (European Commission, 1998a: 14). Indeed, for its Global South signatories, the Convention represented a reformed relationship whereby it secured concrete trade and development commitments from the EU that responded to the demands of the ACP states. However, for the EU, it addressed economic concerns of the former colonial powers who, now without their colonial enterprise, needed to once again secure "raw material supplies from ACP countries" (Brown: 7).

To be sure, the Lomé Convention is only an outgrowth of an intellectual movement that began in the interwar period in Europe, while embedded in the colonial endeavour still persistent at the time and driven to maintain the metropole's privileged access to the (former) colonies and their resources. One such endeavour was the "Eurafrica construction" that, alongside the Lomé Convention, was the inspiration for several agreements between the EU and African countries, that include the Convention of Yaounde I (I964–1969), Convention of Yaounde II (I969–1975) and Convention of Lomé II (1980–1985) (Langan and Price, 2020). Outwardly, Eurafrica was animated by the principles of "complementarity and interdependence" (Martin, 1982: 221). Yet, its ideology was socialised in the intellectuality of colonisation which assumes that "the fate of Europe and Africa is . . . naturally and inextricably linked at the political, economic, social, and cultural levels" (ibid.: 222). The hierarchies that characterised colonial rule were then inscribed in the subsequent conventions between the EU and Africa. Accordingly, the latter only serves as source for raw materials for European commodities and a subsequent market for the same, while the former fulfils Africa's need for "the capital, technology, and know-how of Europe" (ibid.: 222; see also Liniger-Goumaz, 1972). This conception of Africa is what led the early proponent of European integration Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi to once succinctly write, "Africa could provide Europe with raw materials for its industry, nutrition for its population, land for its overpopulation, labour for its unemployed, and markets for its products" (1929: 3; cited in Hansen and Jonsson, 2011: 449).

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Here, it is critical to recognise that, after all, colonialism symbolised the "expansionist phase in the evolution of the modern market economy" (Hopkins, 1973: 157). It eliminated the spatial barriers to the establishment of a global supply chain in the interest of enterprises in the Global North and led to the growth of the "export sector in the nineteenth century" (ibid.: 157). Until the onset of colonialism, the slave trade was the most dominant facet of economic relations between Europe and Africa (Rodney, 1972 [2018]: 106). Colonialism then further facilitated the export of commodities such as "spices, gold, and ivory", while maintaining historically unequal (nature of) economic relations between the two continents (Martin, 1982: 223). So, as the Treaty of Rome was signed in 1957 and led to the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) as a precursor to the EU, it would be inadequate to term it as just a customs union. It was also a continuation of this historical nature of Europe's economic relations in the Global South. And, for the metropolitan signatories of the Treaty of Rome, the EEC was a means of rationalising the management of the colonies by turning it into "a shared concern and a shared possibility" for the continent as a whole (Hansen and Jonsson, 2014: 244).

With European colonialism informing the founding rationale (and purpose) of the EU in this way, the next section follows these legacies' contemporary relevance – not least in the way they continue to inform the EU's external relations in the Middle East, long after the official end of colonial rule.

From colonial to postcolonial: EU–Middle East relations

The introductory article of the first issue of the journal *History of the Present* argued that the study of history is meant to be "a critical endeavour", especially as one that has the potential to elaborate on the role of historical developments in establishing "categories of contemporary debate" and in making them appear "inevitable, natural, or culturally necessary" (Scott et al., 2011: 1). In the same way, the preceding discussion on the way Europe's history of colonial endeavours remains in the foundations of the EU functions as a contextual background for better understanding its contemporary role in the Middle East. Of course, it would be "easy" to argue for the continued relevance of Europe's colonial legacies seeing as the genesis of a European political and economic union occurred alongside the colonial endeavours of the metropolitan Member States, many of which persisted long after the formal establishment of the EU. For example, the government of Belgium maintained its rule over Belgian Congo until 1960, Algeria did not gain its independence from France until 1962 and Qatar was a British colony until 1971. But here we would also need to recognise that the continuance of the impressions of colonisation, in the era of the postcolonial, is also characteristic of the experience of colonial rule. The term "postcolonial" is, for one thing, a chronological indicator representing a period "post" the colonial period. However, it also refers to the resilience of colonial structures, institutions and discourses whereby, even in the era of the postcolonial state, impressions of the era of colonisation persist; leaving behind, especially the formerly colonised, the complicated task of parsing out an indigenous identity out of the midst of the remnants of colonial rule (Yeoh, 2001; Sen, 2020b).

With regard to EU–Middle East relations, the framework of the relationship has been informed by a multiplicity of bilateral and multilateral agreements and conventions. Turkey, for instance, signed an association agreement with the EEC in 1963 which "established an unequivocal membership" prospect (Schimmelfennig, 2009: 420). Since 1987, Turkey has been formally pursuing an, albeit uneven, path towards EU membership (Arikan, 2006; Müftüler-Baç, 2008; Müftüler-Baç, 2005). Similarly, an EU–Tunisia Association Agreement was signed in 1998 that provides for a framework for political dialogue, trade as well as social and cultural

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cooperation (European Commission, 1998b; Brown et al., 2009). In 1969 the EU also "granted preferential access" to Israeli citrus fruits and, in 1970 signed a "preferential trade agreement". In order to allay concerns that Israel was receiving preferential treatment over its Arab neighbours, the EU signed a flurry of agreements in the years that followed with other countries in the Middle East (Lister, 1997: 84). Of course, broader multilateral agreements include the Barcelona Declaration of 1995 and today relations between the EU and the Middle East and North Africa are shaped by the parameters of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the Union for the Mediterranean and the Middle East Peace Process.

These agreements elaborate on the specificity of the EU's relations with the Middle East. But, as mentioned earlier, this chapter is less concerned with the materiality of EU–Middle East relations. Instead, as a postcolonial critique, it aims at exploring how hierarchies in the international political order, once conceived under the guise of colonial role, animate the EU's external relations in the Middle East. To this end, we need to turn to the central orientating character of the EU's engagement in international politics – namely, its role as a normative power. The normative basis of the EU's engagement does not draw on its material prowess. Instead, it attempts to engage in and shape the international political landscape on the basis of its "ideological power" (Manners, 2002: 239). This power, over the years, has been developed "through a series of declarations, treaties, policies, criteria, and conditions" that have identified key norms such as peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law and human rights as embedded in the legal and political foundations of the EU (Manners, 2002: 242). Just as the EU (cl)aims to embody these principles in its identity and function, its external relations are framed by the assumption that these values are "universally applicable" (Manners, 2008: 46). And, as an embodiment of these normative principles, the EU claims to "live by example" and garners the legitimacy to propagate these principles via its external engagement in international politics (ibid.: 46). Expectedly, this conception of the EU as a normative power has been the subject of extensive deliberation. Some have questioned the novelty of the EU's claim as a normative power since, historically, great powers have frequently claimed to be principled and value-driven in their external relations (Diez, 2005; Brummer, 2009; Wood, 2009). The effectiveness of this normative power has also been a subject of academic deliberation as the EU has demonstrated limited success in its engagement in conflict resolution (Diez and Pace, 2011). Specifically, with regard to its conflict resolution efforts in the Middle East, Pace highlights the problematic and contradictory aspects of the "content, process, agents, environment, mechanisms and goals" of the EU's normative power. Furthermore, seeing the ineffectiveness of the EU, the author posits that its normative power is "a matter of degree" and lacks global significance or resonance (Pace, 2007a: 1059).

Yet, for the purposes of this contribution – more than the material effectiveness of its normative power – it is critical to ask *why* the EU perceives itself as a normative power in the first place? It is here that we notice a certain hierarchy, formulated in a way that is not unlike the hierarchies that defined the unequal relations between the colonised and coloniser. For one thing, the EU's self-perception as a normative power and as a "force for good" in international politics is a discursive construction. More critically, however, this self-perception is built against an assumption that the world beyond Europe is devoid of these values (Pace, 2006, 2007a). In this sense the EU's normative power can be considered a hegemonic discursive practice (Nicolaidis et al., 2013: 196). And, be it with regard to the EU's normative role in the "institutionalisation of the International Criminal Court (ICC) [and] . . . the elaboration and ratification of the Kyoto Protocol" (Scheipers and Sicurelli, 2007: 435) or, as a key facet of EU–Middle East relations, its promotion of liberal democracy in the Middle East and North Africa (Pace, 2009) – its self-perception as a force for good is often self-evident. Of course, as Aggestam notes, the

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normative values that the EU propagates are often contested and perceived "as an imposition of western values". For this reason, she wonders if there is even a "legitimate basis" for the EU to claim that it is indeed a "force for good" (Aggestam, 2008: 6). Nonetheless and despite these fallacies, the EU persists in its normative engagement and with the self-perception as a force for good, precisely because of its historical positionality in the international political order. As discussed earlier, Eurocentrism is very much written into the international political order and it was by means of European colonial endeavours that European enlightenment conceptions of modernity found global resonance. Moreover, seeing the way the political and economic interests of metropolitan powers were inscribed into its foundations, it is not unexpected that the EU conceives itself as a normative actor that embodies and pursues values that are often lacking beyond its borders. In this sense, the EU should not be considered a "radical break" from Europe's colonial past. On the contrary, as I have argued earlier, it is "born out of a desire for continuity and collective management of a colonial world" (Nicolaidis, 2015: 285–286). Admittedly, the EU lacks the material power that once defined the metropolitan states' external engagement. Nonetheless, it strives to maintain its privileged status in the hierarchies of the international political order by means of an ideational superiority as it both assumes that it embodies values that make the EU a force for good and is driven by the belief that the "norms and rules developed in the context of EU polity-building and policy-making" are (or should be) universally applicable (Nicolaidis, 2015: 291).

If the EU's normative power is considered a continuation of colonial hierarchies in this manner, its effects on EU–Middle East relations are twofold. For one thing, the presumed universality of the values propagated by the EU actively undermines the ideologies that may emanate from the Middle East (Staeger, 2016: 994). More critically, at a discursive level, engagement with the Middle East often serves as an opportunity to underline the EU's ideational superiority and embodiment of normative values. This Eurocentrism is, for instance, palpable in the formulation of the ENP. Ostensibly, the ENP is a "joint endeavour that requires action on both sides, by neighbours and by the EU" (European External Action Service, 2016: 1). To this end, it is meant to foster "stabilisation, security, and prosperity" for all its signatories. Yet, the EU nonetheless assumes a semblance of ideational superiority as it undertakes the responsibility of promoting "rule of law, respect for human rights, and social cohesion" i.e., values that the EU presumably already abides by (ibid.: 1). Of course, the promotion of these values is done not *just* in the interest of countries in its immediate neighbourhood. Stability and cohesion in the neighbourhood are considered key to securing the EU that is threatened by undocumented migration and terrorism (ibid.: 4).

Eurocentrism is also unmistakable in a speech delivered by Javier Solana, the Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union at the time. He began by describing a world marked by violence and instability emanating from "imbalances between North and South" (European Union, 2005: 1). Then, specifically referencing developments in the Middle East, he said,

> Everywhere I hear foreign contacts tell me of their need for Europe. Yes, there is a need for Europe around the world! Just look at the Middle East to see how much this is the case. Yes, the magnetic force of the European model is stronger than ever! Yes, Europe today is the main vector of peace and democracy right across the world. How many regions and countries admire the Franco-German reconciliation? This is no messianic posturing on my part, but a statement of fact based on three objective realities: Europe is the most extensive and most developed model of political integration based on law and freedom. Europe is also the world's largest aid donor. And it is

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> the top trading power. Now that is the reason for being called upon, listened to, and respected by our partners!
>
> *(European Union, 2005: 2)*

As its purpose, the speech was delivered as a justification for continuing work on a common EU foreign policy. In this excerpt, however, the tumultuous global political landscape and the instability in the Middle East serve as a background for underlining the global resonance of European values and the relevance of the EU as a normative actor and a force for good. Indeed, the European model of "peace and democracy" was an outcome of a European (Franco-German) reconciliation. Yet, for him, it is a model that is admired globally. And just as European enlightenment conceptions of modernity informed the global political order, the reconciliation also enjoys global relevance as a model for "political integration based on law and freedom".[2] Of course, as Solana also indicates, the global legitimacy for the European model is materially buttressed by the EU's role as the "world's largest aid donor" and as a "top trading power".

Finally, when members of the European Parliament adopted a resolution to suspend EU accession talks with Turkey, it was just rationalised as being in the interest of those effected by Tayyip Erdoğan's autocratic rule. Yet, the decision was seen as a reflection of the EU's normative value (Sen, 2020b). Accordingly, following a vote on the resolution where a majority voted to suspend accession negotiations, rapporteur Kati Piri declared,

> If the EU takes its own values seriously, no other conclusion is possible than to formally suspend the talks on EU integration. Our repeated calls to respect fundamental rights have fallen on deaf ears in Ankara. On top of the severe human rights violations, the dismantling of the rule of law and the fact that Turkey holds the world record for the number of journalists in jail, the recently amended constitution consolidates Erdoğan's authoritarianism.
>
> *(European Parliament, 2019)*

Admittedly, the "problem" here is not the EU's normative values. Its pursuance of these principles is meant to ensure that members and candidate countries abide by these "good" values. Further, by posturing as a normative actor in this manner grants the EU the moral standing to adopt a censorious stance against Turkey (i.e., a candidate country). However, what is also implicit here is that the EU can adopt this stance because it is animated by a self-perception as a force for good that is imprinted with legacies of Europe's colonial past.

Conclusion

Dipesh Chakrabarty's iconic work *Provincializing Europe* (2000) was not about Europe per se. Instead, it deliberated the idea of Europe as the author of political modernity. In the same way, this contribution is less concerned with the material aspects of the EU's relations with the Middle East. Instead, as a postcolonial critique, it elucidated the way Europe's colonial endeavours came to define the past and present of the EU's external relations in the Middle East. The international political system, its legal framework and its financial institutions are embossed with the legacies of colonisation, not least in terms of the hierarchies that, once established under the guise of colonial rule, now shape relations between the Global North and the Global South. Expectedly then, these hierarchies also inform what the EU is and does – seeing as the interests and privileges of the metropolitan powers were written into its foundations and defined its functions. Consequently, these hierarchies inform the EU's contemporary external relations in the

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Middle East (and globally) as a normative power that considers itself as a force for good, with the legitimacy to propagate its normative values globally. The question remains, what is the purpose of elucidating this history in a study of contemporary EU–Middle East relations? As mentioned earlier and already elaborated by postcolonial studies scholars, a historiographical approach to the study of the making of the EU reveals the extent to which the (colonial) past informs and naturalises contemporary formations of thinking about the international political system. More critically, however, a discussion of this history, especially in view of the EU's contemporary (often-securitised) relations with the Middle East, can be instructive in revealing not just how prevalent conceptions of politics came into being but also the alternative (non-Eurocentric) perceptions of politics and modernity that were silenced along the way. Seeing as there is a contemporary push to decolonise research and teaching and to reveal the silenced voices (Trinder, 2020) a historiographic approach could contribute as a critical "first step" towards achieving the same.

Notes

1 The Brahmo Samaj was a Hindu reform movement driven by an aspiration of establishing a ration (Hindu) faith, of social reform that included the emancipation of "workers, peasants and women" and "the idea of universal theistic progress" (Kopf, 1979: 3; see also Heimsath, 1964; Kosambi, 1992).

2 To be sure, the EU has indeed served as a model for other regional groupings like the ACP, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), African Union (AU) and Mercosur. Furthermore, the EU has actively promoted and facilitated regional cooperation agreements (Cameron, 2010; Deinla, 2017).

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