

# Journal of Contemporary European Research

Volume 19, Issue 2 (2023)

Research Article

## Decolonising EU Trade Relations with the Global Souths?

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### **Citation**

Alcazar III, A.S.M., Nessel, C. and Orbie, J. (2023). 'Decolonising EU Trade Relations with the Global Souths?' in, *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 19 (2): 181-206. <https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v19i2.1295>.

First published at: [www.jcer.net](http://www.jcer.net)

## Abstract

That the European Union's common commercial relations with ex-colonies and more broadly the 'tiers monde' now rest variously on benevolence, depoliticised practices, equal partnerships and values fuels reigning foundational myths about the EU in global politics. Efforts to disrupt these received presuppositions have come from interpretivist, postcolonial, post-development, post-structuralist and other heterodox research traditions. Yet the academy has been largely impervious to knowledges that genuinely question and subvert, in both theory and praxis, Eurocentric ways of seeing the world and understanding the EU as a 'benevolent' trade actor on the world stage. In dialogue with existing heterodox approaches, this article asks how we might puncture the coloniality of dominant knowledge regimes about EU trade relations vis-à-vis the global souths, i.e., peoples and places that the EU deems peripheral and, as such, in need of trade-related interventions in the name of development. To this end, we propose different 'subject-positions' with which to unthink and rethink our ways of knowing EU trade policy and the Eurocentrism lurking behind it by turning to decolonial thought. We borrow heavily from the work of Meera Sabaratnam whose 'decolonising strategies' in studying world politics we attempt to exemplify through a critical interrogation of the canonical scholarship around three distinct 'policy worlds' of EU external trade relations: Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) and Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) chapters in free trade agreements. Finally, we think reflexively about the decolonial option and the ruptures it triggers as to what EU trade policy *is* and the colonial logics sustaining 'normative' and 'geopolitical' narratives on/by the EU as a trade power.

## Keywords

Decoloniality; Economic partnership agreements; European Union; Generalised scheme of preferences; Global souths; Trade and sustainable development

On 24 January 2017, the then trade commissioner of the European Union (EU) Cecilia Malmström addressed Bruegel and, in defence of a besieged EU common commercial policy establishment post-2015, had the following to say about trade:

Trade is a force for good in the world. A way to engage with other nations to foster change. A way to support our values and standards, and spread them across the globe. A way to help the poorest on the planet develop, grow, and improve their lives. Millions of people have been lifted out of poverty because of trade. (Malmström 2017)

Although the updated Trade Policy Review of February 2021 puts more emphasis on Europe's strategic autonomy and geopolitical goals, it equally stresses that EU trade policies 'increase trading opportunities for developing countries to reduce poverty and to create jobs based on international values and principles, such as labour and human rights' and pledges that sustainable development commitments in EU trade agreements will be further enforced (European Commission 2021: 13).

The continuity of such normative assertions reflects the self-image of EU policymakers, but also animates political and scholarly understandings of the EU in global trade relations, especially with so-called 'developing' and 'least developed' countries. Those writing within heterodox traditions have sought to puncture the centrality of these claims through different scholarly slants. Several strands stand out. Firstly, an interpretivist perspective contends that 'the construction of a "thicker" picture of European trade policy will require that we look at the commitments and world views of the people involved in producing it' (Bollen 2018: 202). This approach stresses the need for shifting agencies, pitched against the growing 'normativisation' of EU trade policy without necessarily engaging the interpretations of those subjected to it extra-EU. Interpreting the narrative construction of 'ethical' trade between the EU and Vietnam, for instance, aligns with this approach (Nessel & Verhaeghe 2022). Secondly, a post-structuralist critique questions well-established constructions between structure and agency reflected in hegemonic discourses on EU trade policy, for example, by denaturalising notions such as 'free trade' and 'protection' (Jacobs & Orbie 2020). Thirdly, highly resonant with the post-structuralist premise, a post-development view criticises the conditionality behind the EU's unilateral trade preferences and searches for alternatives to the developmentalist scripts that continue to organise the 'developing' world's market relations with the EU (Orbie, Alcazar III & Sioen 2022). Last but not least, EU trade policy has been interrogated from a structure-focused postcolonial lens. In the context of Africa-EU relations, there is a tendency in Economic Partnership Agreements towards sustaining the continued market dominance of EU member states over African economies (Langan 201: ch. 5). From this angle, neocolonial patterns dictate the EU's relations with the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group of former colonies whose trade ties with the EU persist on the basis of dependency (Langan & Price 2020a). By no means, therefore, do we claim there exists a critical lag in the field.

Yet EU trade policy studies have, to the best of our knowledge, been largely impervious to the 'decolonial turn' (Maldonado-Torres 2011) in critical social and political studies (for some notable exceptions on Africa-EU (economic) relations, see Staeger 2016; Hastrup 2020; Langan & Price 2020b; Sebhatu 2020; Polonska-Kimunguyi 2023). Our article explicitly links the critical scholarship on EU trade policy to this intellectual movement. In response to this special issue's judicious invocation of 'disrupting' the study of Europe, we propose to deviate from Eurocentric ways of seeing world politics and ask how we might reconfigure our understanding of EU trade policy *decolonially*.

From a decolonial perspective, interrogating epistemic orthodoxies is understood as a 'call for action, for change ... [that] necessitates the problematisation of Eurocentrism as a mode of organising knowledge' and the attendant spatial and geopolitical hierarchies of

(re)producing knowledge about the socio-political world (Capan 2017: 9). In this sense, decolonial thinking is 'an unsettling approach' (ibid), one that aims not only at pluralising voices but at disrupting our ways of knowing.

To be sure, thinking in decolonial terms should not be misread as a necessary and sufficient condition for being critical of and within European Studies (ES). In other words, it does not mean that claims to criticality are now to be judged as legitimate if and only if a decolonial approach is pursued. Different forms of critique exist to defy different things one may find problematic in the academy. That said, taking decoloniality seriously 'requires from those of us at the hegemonic centre a willingness to a dislocation of power; an openness to (have others) redefine expertise and rigour, and to discomfort in the face of new knowledges' (Rutazibwa 2020: 240).

To this end, our article reconsiders specific writings within the field of ES with 'state-of-the-art' claims on EU trade policy, especially in the form of handbooks and special issues.<sup>1</sup> Our goal is not comprehensiveness, but to critique those texts positioned to enjoy the most scholarly outreach, to be deemed authoritative, or to claim academic expertise on the subject. In other words, these texts are what students often encounter the first time they study EU trade policy. We have delimited a common set of key writings on EU trade policy by searching on Google Scholar. Here, we have mainly considered political studies texts and excluded those steeped in legal and economic approaches as well as those already taking a critical stance (e.g., contributions unmasking the neocolonialism of EU trade policy). Horizontally, we have approached this corpus of knowledge by reading across the texts and critically discerning what 'avatars' of Eurocentrism they sustain regarding EU trade policy. We have also incorporated additional writings to supplement our analysis, except on the ACP-EU trade regime whose coverage in the key texts is deemed sufficient (see the annex for an overview of our selected texts).

The rest of the article unfolds in three parts. Firstly, we offer a general grounding of decoloniality. More specifically, we propose different 'subject-positions' with which to unthink and rethink our ways of studying EU trade policy and the Eurocentrism lurking behind it by turning to decolonial thought. Secondly, we exemplify the merits of Meera Sabaratnam's 'decolonising strategies' through a critical interrogation of the scholarship around three distinct 'policy worlds'<sup>2</sup> of EU external trade relations: Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA), Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) and Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) chapters in free trade agreements. We bring to the fore these policy worlds because they are the principal means through which the (geo)politics of trade between the global souths and the EU is entrenched. In doing so, we respond directly to calls urging us to move critique beyond questioning the more symbolic, abstract and homogenous manifestations of coloniality towards unsettling the more material, concrete and heterogenous manifestations of the colonial/modern and Eurocentric capitalist world order (Gandarilla Salgado, García-Bravo & Benzi 2021: 212). Finally, we think reflexively about the decolonial option and the ruptures it triggers as to what EU trade policy *is* and the coloniality of 'normative' and 'geopolitical' narratives on the EU as a trade power.

## THINKING DECOLONIALY

In considering how the Eurocentric study of trade policy might be disrupted within European Studies, we engage with decolonial thought in two ways. Firstly, we ask what it means to think about decoloniality as an option. What can we learn from the 'decolonial turn' in critical social and political studies? Why does it matter now, and for whom? Secondly, we think through what a decolonial project in ES might look like. Can we imagine doing ES differently and, if so, in what ways? Beyond Eurocentrism, how might decolonial thought reorientate our ways of seeing the EU as a trade power in world politics 'otherwise' (Escobar 2007)?

For Samir Amin, Eurocentrism has propelled a global political project at the service of imperialism and a world capitalist order whose 'centre' exploits the 'periphery' (Amin 2009 [1988]). In International Relations (IR), Eurocentrism is often read as a mode of organising knowledge that (re)enacts 'the colonial matrix of power' (Capan 2017: 3), as a 'pathology' (Rutazibwa 2020: 233), or as a 'monoculture of scientism' (Zondi 2018: 19). In this article, we understand Eurocentrism as 'the sensibility that *Europe is historically, economically, culturally and politically distinctive in ways which significantly determine the overall character of world politics*' (Sabaratnam 2013: 262, emphasis in original). Eurocentrism assumes different 'avatars' or manifestations (Wallerstein 1997; Sabaratnam 2013). Culturalist avatars obsess over the civilisational, cultural or racial differences between an enlightened Europe and the 'unruly' rest. Here, the rest becomes objectified in discourse and practice as needing external (read: EU) aid, control, direction, involvement, management or salvation. Epistemic avatars insist on the universalism of social scientific knowledge conventions emerging out of Europe since the nineteenth century. Here, the colonial logics and rationalities in making 'scientific' and 'legitimate' claims about the social and political world are often reproduced, thereby stifling the possibility of knowing 'otherwise' (Escobar 2007). Historical avatars frame Europe as the principal subject of world history. This framing cloaks the past, present and future entanglements of different parts of the world in Europe's (hi)story.

### Decoloniality as an Option

Before considering what a decolonial approach to EU trade policy might look like, it is imperative that we situate decoloniality in the scholarly literature. Here, we make no systematic attempt to articulate the richness of this body of knowledge cultivated by Latin American intellectuals including Aníbal Quijano, Arturo Escobar, María Lugones, Walter Dignolo, and Rosalba Icaza, among many others. Nor do we juxtapose decoloniality vis-à-vis postcolonialism, which has been ably written about elsewhere (see Bhambra 2014: ch. 4). Nor do we bring any conceptual or theoretical innovation to 'anticolonial', 'decolonial' or 'decolonising' critiques and praxes across social and political studies (e.g., Sabaratnam 2011; 2013; Bhambra 2014; Pham & Shilliam 2016; Staeger 2016; Blaney & Tickner 2017; Capan 2017; Motta 2017; Sabaratnam 2017; Woons & Weier 2017; Bhambra et al. 2018; Zondi 2018; Haastrup 2020; Kamola 2020; Patel 2020; Shilliam 2021; Bhambra 2022; Fúnez-Flores 2022; Evans & Petropoulou Ionescu, this issue). Instead, we engage briefly with the notion of decoloniality in an effort to recast our understanding of EU trade policy by centring knowledges from and for the global souths (Muñoz García, Lira & Loncón 2022). By invoking knowledges in the plural, we stress that different ways of knowing outside Eurocentrism have long existed and continue to exist within anti-colonial sites of struggles, past and present, across the global souths.

As an intellectual movement, decoloniality is premised on the notion of coloniality/modernity or the 'no modernity without coloniality' thesis: that European modernity and coloniality have inextricably co-constituted one another (Icaza 2017). It problematises this co-constitution and how it is inscribed into a Eurocentric world order seen as 'universal, good, and a suitable aspiration [*imposition?*] for others' (Patel 2020: 1467). As a way of seeing the world, coloniality forces us to think through the persistence of civilisational, economic, epistemic, gendered and racialised hierarchies today despite the formal closure of colonialism (see Quijano 2000; Lugones 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013).

Central to decolonial thought is shifting the *locus of enunciation*, which is 'unavoidable if we aim at changing the terms and not only the content of the conversation' (Dignolo 2009: 162). The locus of enunciation is the site where one speaks about the world Eurocentrically. It brings to the fore the geopolitics of knowledge that privileges Eurocentric epistemologies by virtue of their supposed objectivity, neutrality, rationality and scientism. To change the site of enunciation means to disrupt the European self as

'knower' and the non-European other as 'known' in ways that go beyond what has emerged as the 'decentring agenda' in EU foreign policy studies (Orbie et al. 2023). To enunciate differently means 'to affirm the exteriority and alterity of others as well as the discourses and practices born in sites of struggle' (Fúnez-Flores 2022: 14). Two intertwined ideas build on this understanding. Decoloniality demands a shift in the locus of enunciation beyond the confines of Eurocentric categories, thoughts and experiences. This implies *epistemic delinking* from knowledge regimes that have produced and reproduced 'places of non-thought' (Mignolo 2009) from a locus of enunciation that privileges Europe as knower. In turn, this delinking means *border thinking* 'as an epistemological position that contributes to a shift in the forms of knowing in which the world is thought from the concrete incarnated experiences of colonial difference and the wounds left' (Icaza 2017: 29).

Decoloniality is interpreted 'not as a new universal that presents itself as the right one that supersedes all the previous and existing ones, but as an option' (Mignolo 2011a: 273). To embrace the *decolonial option* means to make legible, epistemically and politically, the 'trajectories in knowledges and cosmovisions that have been actively produced as backward or "sub-altern" by hegemonic forms of understanding "the international" and "global politics"' (Santos et al. 2007, as cited in Icaza 2017: 29). Decolonial thinking as an 'option' or 'among a plurality of options' differs from a paradigm or grand theory as it wishes to avoid becoming a dominant epistemic project (Icaza 2017: 27).

Decoloniality, therefore, aligns itself with pluriversality, not universality. Imagining our world in pluriversal terms means a disavowal of a single global order based on monocentric, objectivist and universalistic claims (Mignolo 2011b: 23; Kothari et al. 2019). In a pluriverse, the decolonial option would 'consider worldly multiplicity as reals' (Blaney & Tickner 2017: 303). In a pluriverse, one may dream of 'a world in which many worlds fit', following one of the oft-cited political convictions of the Zapatistas (2001). In a pluriverse, doing international relations differently would mean fostering partnerships on a similar footing, while at the same time accepting difference and recognising the plurality of emancipatory and humanistic ways of being (Kothari et al. 2019). In a pluriverse, the hierarchies between previously asphyxiated knowledges and Eurocentrism would collapse. In this sense, decoloniality remains a long-standing, unfinished, ongoing project working to dismantle the coloniality of being, of power and of knowing (Maldonado-Torres 2011; 2020).

### **Decolonial Thinking as Intellectual Strategies**

In advocating a decolonial option for the study of trade within ES, we consider four different but interrelated approaches with which to rethink how we come to know about EU trade policy from alternative 'subject-positions' (Sabaratnam 2011) or from a non-Eurocentric (not anti-European!) 'locus of enunciation' (Mignolo 2009). We read these decolonising approaches as 'intellectual strategies' (Sabaratnam 2011: 784) intended to unsettle the primacy and persistence of certain knowledge regimes that naturalise historically entrenched power imbalances between the EU and its presumed objects/others in global relations. Such knowledge regimes hinge on the underlying presumption of a European/EU subject through whose lens world politics is enunciated, seen, experienced, narrated, written and known. Decolonising strategies militate against this premise, but do so in the spirit of building dialogue between those working within and outside this site of enunciation in the hopes of generating:

alternative accounts of subjecthood as the basis for inquiry. The recognition of possible alternative subjects of inquiry is the essential precondition for a *dialogic* mode of inquiry in IR – that is, speaking across divides from different positions. (Sabaratnam 2011: 785)

We foreground Sabaratnam because her writings are central to current avant-garde debates in decolonising the study of world politics. Theoretically, her work provides a pragmatic approach, which speaks to all four aforementioned strands of critical scholarship on EU trade policy without getting lost in meta-theoretical conflicts between and among the perspectives. Empirically, her 'intellectual strategies' lend themselves well to (re)searching the EU's entanglements in world politics, not least in trade. While we have EU trade policy in mind in our interpretation of Sabaratnam's writings, the strategies we advance here may also be fruitfully translated to 'disrupting' other facets of the EU's external relations (e.g., cyberspace, climate, environment, security, migration) and ES more generally. Where possible, we point to extant writings that cohere, either implicitly or explicitly, with each of the strategies to delimit a patchy, hitherto fragmented but emerging epistemic space that articulates a decolonial ethos within ES.

### *1. Deconstructing Europe and the EU as a Knowing-subject that Represents the (Developing) World as its Object*

The first strategy unmasks how 'the conceptual framings of IR and international politics express and reinforce hierarchical subject-object relationships between formerly colonising and colonised peoples, despite the political-legal act of decolonisation' (Sabaratnam 2011: 786). The emphasis is placed on discerning the discursive and normative structures undergirding the EU's external relations. In particular, it alerts us to the ways in which dominant knowledge regimes and political discourses objectify peoples and places that the EU deems less modern, less developed, less capable. This framing constructs a view that those peoples and places inhabit 'a space of tradition and opportunity to be governed and explored, or alternatively feared, by the rational and enlightened West' (Sabaratnam 2013: 262). Here, it is important to shift our analytic gaze beyond the assertion of 'cultural/colonial difference' (that is, Europe's Self sees the Other as 'alien') to an understanding that concentrates on the 'alienating' character of this assumed difference. In other words, the first strategy pays less attention to the constructed differences between the European self and its presumed other as such, and is more interested in scrutinising what acts of alienation it ultimately gives rise to within the realm of political possibility, in terms of displacing, violating, silencing, humiliating, or dispossessing the EU's supposed other (Sabaratnam 2013: 272-273).

Several writings in ES gesture to deconstructing the EU as a knowing-subject that objectifies the 'developing' world. A Foucauldian critique of 'normative power Europe' exposes how the EU's diffusion of 'good' policing norms in the Balkans has simultaneously produced epistemic hierarchies between EU and host authorities and displaced domestic policing knowledge (Merlingen 2007). A discursive analysis of texts produced by the presumably status-neutral EU rule of law mission in Kosovo (EULEX) exposes how the EU has both affirmed and silenced Kosovo's independence. At times, not only does EULEX discursively engage in silencing the independence of Kosovo, but silences also 'an entire set of conflicts, relations of power, and disputes [that] are made technical and generic' (Musliu 2014: 484). On trade, the conditionality regime behind the EU's unilateral tariff preferences enables the objectification of 'vulnerable' countries to EU monitoring and technocratic surveillance around 'severe and systematic' violations of international conventions (Orbie, Alcazar III & Sioen 2022).

### *2. Rehistoricising Silences and Erasures in the Entanglements of Europe and the EU in Modern History and Global Affairs*

The second strategy devolves into two historiographical intents. Firstly, a decolonial understanding necessitates 'the direct contradiction of foundational historical myths in social theory and discourse about Europe itself' (Sabaratnam 2011: 787). These myths are premised on taken-for-granted narratives that Europe gave birth to technological advancement, development and modernity in world history; that Europe attended to the predicaments of international difference by establishing a Westphalian world order based on sovereign nation-states (and later by instituting a *sui generis* supranational order qua

EU); that Europe has been the provenance of ethical and political thought deemed enlightened and, therefore, worldly and universalistic. A decolonising approach, then, would inscribe what has been absent into the ways in which European history has been told and retold, written and rewritten. In this sense, Hansen and Jonsson (2014a) have rehistoricised the complicity of colonialism in furthering European integration and sought to address the near-absence of this complicity in EU studies and historiographies of European colonialism. A closely related effort has recovered the geopolitical vision of 'Eurafrica' and the initial thinking behind the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC), which was premised on the idea of integrating the Common Market and certain parts of Africa into one imperial market order (Balogh 1962; Hansen & Jonsson 2012). Eurafrica regurgitated colonial logics as early European integration efforts sought to cement Western Europe's power over Africa and in particular to rehabilitate the colonial projects of imperial France and Belgium (Hansen & Jonsson 2012: 1038).

Furthermore, a second intent when it comes to historiographical erasures recovers the 'significance of the pluralities of pasts, presents and futures that were and are happening elsewhere' (Sabaratnam 2011: 788) to the trajectory of European progress or, in other words, the co-constitution of European coloniality/modernity. This is so because other histories are systematically erased from historiographical accounts of 'development' and social transformation, which are often enunciated by virtue of the categories and paths contingent upon Europe's march to modernity. Here, Walter Rodney's (1972) magnum opus immediately comes to mind as a compelling case for how colonialism, extraction and slavery in Africa have contributed to Europe's capitalist development. In this context, a decolonial agenda for Europe enjoins us to come to terms with how the 'varieties of colonialism' have enriched and enabled European societies, including the EU project itself, in hopes of opening the door to discussions around post-colonial reparations (Bhambra 2022). It is crucial to ethically prioritise situated and embodied knowledges from the global souths whose historical presence is often elided. Doing so would analytically foreground the social and political changes that have materialised in post-colonial contexts as a consequence of European colonial emigration/settlement, dispossession, appropriation, extraction and enslavement. It would also make more legible what European colonisation had altered in those subjugated societies and how Europe had gained materially in the process, especially since global trade has been intimately enmeshed in fuelling expansionist European colonial and imperial enterprises. These submerged histories are often forgotten when thinking about contemporary systemic problems of unequal exchange between the EU and so-called 'developing' countries.

### *3. Politicising the Distinct Forms of EU Interventions in the Global Souths*

The third strategy demands genuine engagement with how those targeted by external interventions experience and interpret the material impact of those interventions. It unmask the different modes of entitlement, dispossession and accumulation that underpin the rationales for intervention and its distributive effects (Sabaratnam 2013: 273–274). Politicising trade-related interventions by the EU such as aid-for-trade schemes, capacity building programmes, market-making initiatives, monitoring and sanctions demands a recognition that these technologies are implicated in a politics of distribution that reconfigures domestic political economy constellations. This stance, therefore, proposes a direct provocation against viewing EU trade policy as developmentalist, technocratic, or neutral. As an intellectual strategy, politicising EU interventions acknowledges the 'targets' of those interventions as a site of knowledge and political agency. It pays attention to how the 'other' understands and experiences the political (in)significance of EU trade policy. For instance, the technocratic refocusing of EU unilateral market access under the Everything but Arms (EBA) regime in favour of 'least developed countries' (LDCs) has unleashed 'new regional fault lines' leading to the material disadvantage of non-LDCs compared to LDCs in the ACP group (Lincoln 2008: 224). Lincoln reads EBA as a de-historicisation of Europe-ACP ties founded on imperialism, as the EU repositioned its development efforts from aiding ex-colonies to advancing a more global



pursuit of growth and poverty alleviation in the 'developing' world on the basis of empirical indicators (ibid. 225–226). Moreover, while the EU claims that its 'ethical' trade and development policies on fisheries benefit African economies, Gegout (2016) contradicts this celebrated claim by demonstrating how EU interventions have exhausted fish stocks, altered economic regulatory frameworks and harmed fishing communities in Africa.

The analytic openings from this strategy stand in contradistinction to the 'politicisation' literature, which is typically preoccupied with the contestation of EU trade policy within the EU itself and by EU actors (e.g., Leblond & Viju-Miljusevic 2018). What tends to be excluded from this scholarship are the experiences, struggles and voices of the 'non-EU' in challenging what EU trade policy is or should be in the twenty-first century. However, political economy analyses should be wary of dwelling at the level of political elites in the global souths, which are oftentimes co-opted by EU trade thinking (Orbie, Alcazar III & Sioen 2022). Depending on the research framing, this strategy enjoins us to take seriously the perspectives of activists, environmentalists, indigenous peoples, labour groups, local communities, nongovernmental organisations, scholars, trade unions, workers and other affected groups whose political interpretations are often methodologically marginalised when we talk about EU trade policy being 'politicised'.

#### *4. Taking Subaltern Subjectivities and Alternative Political Subjecthoods Seriously*

Last but not least, the fourth strategy intentionally subverts the notion of Europe and the EU as the principal subject of modern history and 'being' in the world. This decolonial critique spells out at least two intellectual stances. The first involves 'pluralising the various potential subjects of social inquiry and analysing world politics from alternative subaltern perspectives' (Sabaratnam 2011: 789). It demands tilting the focus away from the centrality of EU subjectivities on global trade politics and cultivating political inquiry 'from below'. Rather than privileging what EU-centric subjects think about the substance of EU trade policy in the world, a decolonial project repositions the site of interpretation to generate situated knowledge with or, more importantly, by subjects themselves in the global souths that the EU claims to transform, *inter alia*, through trade. Consider how the Permanent People's Tribunals against European Multinationals and Neoliberalism as a bottom-up forum have resisted and contested the neoliberal governance model promoted by the EU in Latin America and the Caribbean (Icaza 2010). Another work that centres the other's subjectivities asks how market liberal and social norms have been received/resisted in India in the context of bilateral trade negotiations with the EU (Orbie & Khorana 2015). From a decolonial perspective, reclaiming African subjectivities challenges the enduring coloniality that shapes Africa–EU relations (Haastrup 2020).

The second intellectual stance prioritises 'the recovery of alternative *political* subjecthoods in both historical and contemporary settings' (Sabaratnam 2011: 791). It foregrounds other political imaginaries of living and being in the world from the alterities of EU trade policy. It is, therefore, a subversion of the 'cosmopolitan' made intelligible through EU trade thinking as a 'model', as a shining exemplar for others to emulate or mimic. For instance, some point to post-development and degrowth as political subjecthoods that could substitute 'the prevailing developmentalist imaginaries' imbued in the EU's unilateral preferential trade regime (Orbie, Alcazar III & Sioen 2022).

As such, thinking beyond EU subjectivities and subjecthoods aligns with critical qualitative and interpretivist methods and methodologies in social and political studies. It eschews the parsimony of large-N positivist approaches, which often methodologically bypass the lived experiences of individuals. Without any contextual understanding of the 'lifeworlds' of the 'non-EU', the idea of speaking across divides around contentious political issues on trade seems difficult, if not impossible. Generating 'thicker analyses' of the worldviews by those subjected to EU trade policy attends to this problem, such as through political ethnography (Schatz 2009) or critical policy ethnography (Dubois 2017). However, it is crucial to underline the importance of committing to the politics of refusal in pain-based

research (Tuck & Yang 2014), or to epistemic co-generation in terms of 'researching with' people in the field and of learning from our interlocutors, so as not to replicate the colonialist foundations or extractivist nature in the chequered history of Anthropology as a discipline (Richmond, Kappler & Bjorkdal 2015; Pachirat 2018).<sup>3</sup>

## **KNOWING EU TRADE POLICY, OTHERWISE?**

How might we reimagine EU trade policy from alternative subject-positions? In this section, we delve into three distinct 'policy worlds' through which the EU governs its commercial relations with those considered to be on the peripheries of the global economic order. Specifically, we articulate how the decolonising strategies we have proposed could reframe our understanding of the EU's Economic Partnership Agreements, Generalised Scheme of Preferences and Trade and Sustainable Development chapters in free trade agreements. In what follows, we point to how the study of EU external trade relations might be reread from a decolonial lens. Through this reorientation, we hope to demonstrate how we, as scholars of EU trade policy vis-à-vis the global souths, could 'move away from assuming the non-West as a space of insuperable difference and move towards a more articulate, inclusive and concrete dialogue about the nature of international power' (Sabaratnam 2011: 795).

### **Economic Partnership Agreements**

Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) were foreseen in the Cotonou Agreement that was concluded between the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group of states in 2000. The EPAs would replace the Lomé-style trade regime that was based on non-reciprocal market access, by introducing reciprocal liberalisation between the EU on the one hand and several ACP sub-regions on the other hand. The Cotonou Agreement (Art. 37) stipulates that all ACP countries 'in a position to do so' will engage in EPAs. Negotiations started in 2002 and were expected to be finalised in 2007. The EU strongly insisted on the conclusion of ambitious EPAs that cover not only free trade but also so-called 'new' trade issues such as investment and services. However, the process turned out to be complicated and contested and several countries have only signed interim EPAs and/or have not ratified EPAs.

Generally, academic studies on EPAs have been more receptive to decolonial thinking compared to research on GSP and TSD chapters. Nonetheless, Eurocentric avatars also appear in key textbooks and other publications. In terms of historical avatars, it is worth stressing that the dominant story of EPAs stresses the shift from Lomé to Cotonou. Much ink has been spilled on this change (Young & Peterson 2014: 188-190; Perdakis and Perdakis 2018: 30) or even 'radical innovation' (Faber and Orbie 2009 in Gstöhl & De Bièvre 2017: 145). Often mentioned explanations concern the (perceived) failure of the Lomé system and the growing importance of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Young & Peterson 2014: 189; Gstöhl & De Bièvre 2017: 145). The increased popularity of neoliberal beliefs within the EU is also recognised (Young & Peterson 2014: 189; Garcia 2018: 66). Despite the relevance of such research, the emphasis on policy *change* has the unintended effect of also obfuscating colonial *continuities*.

This neglect of colonial continuities is reinforced through the ways in which the EU's motives, the ACP-EU relationship and the ACP group are represented. Firstly, EU motives are typically analysed as oscillating between good values versus bad interests. Young and Peterson stress twice that 'the primary motivation [...] has been to promote development' (2014: 188) and 'helping developing countries' (2014: 193) while Garcia highlights the ideational dimension of EPAs (2018: 66; see also Heron & Siles-Brügge 2012 on commercial interests). Such motivational framings highlight the intentionality of the EU and, therefore, overshadow more structural logics that go beyond motivations and concern more fundamentally the Eurocentric, modernist and colonial paradigm underpinning EU relations with the ACP (Hurt 2012; Delputte & Orbie 2020). By focusing on the false

dichotomy between EU values and interests, it is easily overlooked how these are interwoven in a colonial structure to the extent that they are indiscernible (and that the distinction becomes irrelevant) (Rutazibwa 2013: 84; Staeger 2016: 983–984). Secondly, the *nature* of the ACP–EU relationship is often described as being ‘political’ (Young and Peterson 2014: 63) or ‘historical’ (Gstöhl & De Bièvre 2017: 151), thereby avoiding the more controversial C-word. Thirdly, the common shortcut description of ACP as ‘former colonies’ suggests that the main characteristic of these countries is that they were *formerly* colonised, thereby underlining that the main demarcation line in this story are the dates before and after formal independence.

This characterisation of the ACP group relates to culturalist avatars in EPA scholarship. Unsurprisingly, studies are primarily interested in questions around the EU’s power vis-à-vis other countries. Key textbooks and chapters on EU trade politics consistently write about ACP countries without going into detail about the divergences and complexities among and within these countries. The only exception when different preferences within the ACP group are mentioned, is when it serves to illustrate the EU’s failed attempts to stimulate regionalism, for instance, towards Southern Africa (e.g., Young & Peterson 2014: 190). Indeed, what counts as failure or success is assessed from an EU perspective. For example, Young and Peterson (2014: 190) define the ‘central problem’ with EPAs as the EU giving away its negotiation leverage through ‘Everything but Arms’. Similarly, Gstöhl and De Bièvre (2017: 148) stress how EBA has undermined the EU’s impact. When evaluating 15 years of negotiations as ‘rather disappointing’ (Gstöhl & De Bièvre 2017: 149), they refer to the limited signatories of full EPAs, *not* the EU’s apparent failure to consider the demands and preferences of people, groups and countries within the ACP. Admittedly, the latter is hard to prove in the absence of many detailed studies on the (disruptive?) impact of EPAs. Meanwhile, key textbooks depict the ACP group as a rather monolithic actor that resides in the background and appears mostly defensive in opposing the shift towards reciprocity and regionalism. Epistemically, we have much more research insights on EU motives and institutions in relation to EPAs than on what these trade arrangements mean for people and communities in Africa and how decolonial alternatives might be concretised.

Furthermore, academic writings tend to reflect EU policy discourses that present the EU as a benevolent actor that aims to help (or should help) poor African countries (Faber & Orbie 2009). Studies on trade policies, including the EPAs, almost consistently write about how ACP countries ‘enjoy’ preferences (or ‘privileges’) that are ‘given’ or ‘granted’ by the EU (Young & Peterson 2014: 188, 190; Gstöhl & De Bièvre 2017: 151). Such language conceals the fact that European businesses and consumers are in fact major beneficiaries of cheaper imports thanks to EPAs, while their impact on the people and environment of the exporting countries may be detrimental. This developmentalist approach to studying the EU’s trade-development nexus reinforces colonialist donor-recipient images (Orbie, Alcazar III & Sioen 2022).

Several scholars have at least partly engaged in alternative strategies to studying EPAs. In terms of rehistoricising silences (strategy 2), the history of EPAs could be rewritten by reference to the intrinsic coloniality of the European integration project since its very origins in the Treaty of Rome (e.g., Schreurs 1993; Hansen and Jonsson 2014a; Jones and Weinhardt 2015; Kotsopolous and Mattheis 2018: 445; Sebhatu 2020: 43; Polonska-Kimunguyi 2023). Perdakis and Perdakis elaborate on the origins of the EEC, including an extensive part on the 1956 Spaak Report (2018: 22), but they fail to mention the key impact of what Spaak called ‘the dream of Eurafrica’ (see Hansen and Jonsson 2014b: 448) on the creation of the EEC. Gstöhl and De Bièvre mention ‘the perpetuation of unilateral dependence of ACP countries on the benevolence of the Community’ and the system of ‘collective clientelism’ between EU and ACP (2017: 141; referring to the seminal work of Ravenhill 1985). However, they do not extend this analysis to EPAs, despite clear continuities between the reciprocal market access required under Yaoundé (1963–1975)

and the EPAs. Furthermore, the former Lomé system may not be so different from the current EPAs as is often suggested, taking into account that the non-reciprocal tariff preference and schemes like STABEX also turned out to continue the dependencies of the ACP on commodity trade with Europe. Rewriting the histories of EPAs could be inspired by Nkrumah's work on neocolonialism (Nkrumah 1965; see also Langan 2018 who revisits the vision of Kwame Nkrumah and Sekou Touré) as well as Galtung's (1973) analysis of EEC structural power vis-à-vis the global souths through exploitation, fragmentation and penetration. More research into EU and member state archives may also contribute to problematising the colonial thinking involved in ACP-EU histories (strategies 1 & 2). For instance, Dimier's (2021) recovery of a theatrical play on the 'métro-circulaire' illustrates the colonial spirit of European Commission officials in the 1960s.

Rehistoricising could also involve the centring of subaltern subjectivities. This could be done by highlighting the agency of African leaders and movements during events such as the eight Pan-African Congresses that have taken place since 1900 and the All African Peoples Conference that took place in Accra in 1958 (strategy 4), all of which illustrate the inextricable links between colonialism, European cooperation and Pan-Africanism. This may show that there has *always* — not just since the EPAs — been strong resistance within the ACP to how its trade relations with Europe should be organised. When analysing recent EPA episodes, more attention should be paid to African agency and subjectivities (strategies 3 & 4). Murray-Evans (2018) stresses the agency of strong and weak actors within the countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in negotiating the EPA. Haastrup highlights that there is a distinctive impetus for regionalism in Africa and that studying this (instead of 'the EU's own commitment to promoting a version of itself') is 'essential to realising African agency' (Haastrup 2020: 516). Sebhatu criticises the 'epistemic violence' in the dominant discourse and research on EPAs which discursively constructs the ACP as weak (Sebhatu 2020: 45). Studies of transnational activism against EPAs (e.g., Del Felice 2014) could link with local resistance strategies and 'patterns of politicization' (Plank et al. 2021: 166–170) within ACP countries. Langan and Price (2021) analyse the EPA with Western African countries from the perspective of people in Ghana's poultry sector. However, interpretivist studies that profoundly engage with political subjectivities within the so-called ACP partner countries are, to our knowledge, non-existent within the archive of predominantly Anglophone scholarship that we know about Africa-EU relations.

### **Generalised Scheme of Preferences**

Since 1971, the EU has established a Generalised Scheme of Preferences, which today is run as a three-headed unilateral market access regime for countries categorised as 'developing' and 'least developed' by the United Nations. GSP targets are typically trumpeted as 'beneficiaries' in both mainstream academic and policy discourse, as if already presuming, by default, a necessarily positive connotation of GSP. The standard GSP allows exporters from eligible 'developing' countries to send their wares to the EU, with partially or fully reduced customs duties on two-thirds of product lines. The GSP+ variety cuts tariffs down to zero under the same product lines for exports by so-called 'vulnerable' developing countries. The 'plus' in GSP+ signifies that target countries voluntarily apply to adhere to 27 international conventions on, inter alia, good governance, sustainability, as well as fundamental human and labour rights in exchange for more market access to the EU. Finally, the EBA initiative opens the EU market to all exports, except ammunitions and weaponry, from 'least developed' countries.

Historical and epistemic avatars of Eurocentrism permeate the scholarship on the policy world of the EU's GSP. Although colonial and racial differences between the EU and GSP countries are not explicitly emphasised, culturalist avatars manifest themselves through epistemic ones as the 'rest' becomes objectified in the scholarly canon as needing EU intervention. On the one hand, the institutional forerunners of the EU are often framed as

the principal subject to contextualise the origin of EU GSP. It was the EEC that first granted generalised trade preferences to, and in favour of, the Third World. It was Europe that unilaterally opened its markets in aid of less developed, less industrialised countries that were/are not 'there' yet. It was Europe that responded to the recommendation of the United Nations Committee on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) to afford special and differential treatment to developing economies. Despite tracing EU GSP back to UNCTAD, the scholarly literature tends to centre the fact that Europe acted and delivered on UNCTAD demands, thereby effectively ignoring or downplaying the historical milieu of decolonisation within which newly independent states and dependent territories struggled for a 'new' way of organising global economic relations, including the GSP (Gsthöhl & De Bièvre 2017: 154; Perdikis & Perdikis 2018: 30–31). In Young & Peterson (2014: ch. 3), this reference to UNCTAD is not mentioned at all. What is camouflaged is that the notion of instituting generalised preferences by the rich world was only one within a broader set of reformist demands championed by the global souths to contest economic imperialism and dependency in the sixties and amidst calls for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in the seventies. The NIEO envisioned radical systemic reforms that contradicted and moved beyond trade liberalisation (Orbie, Alcazar III & Sioen 2022: 7). Also shrouded is the political significance of Bandung as an Afro-Asian enunciation of 'an-other' way of reimagining global relations that opposes colonialism and neocolonialism (Pham & Shilliam 2016). Furthermore, when narrating the history of the Common Market in relation to external tariffs, no explicit links are forged between the history of preferential trade access for European colonies and ex-colonies within the EEC and that of the GSP (Perdikis & Perdikis 2018). Therefore, the coloniality of 'granting' trade preferences is absent from the standard narrative of how the EU GSP came into being.

On the other hand, received scholarly interpretations of EU GSP as foreign policy sustain epistemic avatars of Eurocentrism. Reading GSP as foreign policy pertains to the idea that the EU exploits trade in international relations to organise its engagement with the (developing) world and to 'extract behavioural changes elsewhere in the world' (García 2018: 62). Two rational, positivist approaches emerge from our reading of the EU trade policy scholarship related to these phenomena. The first is through a two-level game analytical framework where a constellation of EU ideas, interests and institutions determines the contours of EU trade policy 'sub-systems' (Young & Peterson 2014). For example, the sub-system dynamics around EBA allegedly

reflected the pattern of interest mobilization typical of a unilateral policy pursued with much weaker economic partners. Mobilization was unidirectional against liberalization and concentrated in a few sectors. Support for liberalization was due primarily to the normative desire to assist developing countries. (ibid: 193)

The fact that the EU leverages GSP within 'highly asymmetrical' trading relations and according to parochial group interests is unsurprisingly not problematised (ibid.: 185). Because this approach is invested in the internal determinants of EU trade politics, the 'targets' of GSP and how they think about EU trade are methodologically neglected altogether. The second approach relates to the global governance through trade thesis (Marx et al. 2015). It claims to explore why and how the EU externalises non-market governance objectives via trade. Citing general impasse at the multilateral level, the authors argue that the EU pursues global public goods through trade because of its 'strong normative international agenda' (ibid.: 3). Analytically, the entire compendium revolves around the concept of 'market power Europe' (Damro 2012). By adopting this framework, the emphasis is on tracing the 'export' of EU market rules and civilian norms through trade policies, including GSP. Beke and Hachez (2015) suggest that the withdrawal of EU trade preferences from Burma/Myanmar between 1997 and 2013 failed to induce the desired political changes. Meanwhile, Yap (2015) argues that the threatened withdrawal of EU market access perks nudged Bangladesh to adopt stricter labour protection standards

following the Rana Plaza tragedy in 2013. Apropos of the global souths, the contribution develops a clear worldview that reimagines a dual ordering—othering role by the EU on the global periphery: by displacing ‘bad’ local norms as a global public good. A Eurocentric ‘export’ lens does not capture how differently sited actors contest, resist, reject, accommodate, push for, or translate institutional change (indeed it does not even concern itself with these political possibilities). In both approaches, it is clear that the agency of actors in third markets is de-emphasised in their analytical frameworks. Indeed, mainstream political science approaches to EU trade policy remain EU-centric, so that ‘a greater understanding of the “other” in EU trade policy becomes an urgent necessity’ (García 2018: 72).

In order to decolonise these Eurocentric knowledges, a retelling of the history of EU GSP is needed to locate it within the politics of (de)coloniality and how the development of the EU’s common commercial policy is implicated in it (strategies 1 & 2). This would mean recovering an understanding of trade preferences through the varied and connected experiences of European economic subjugation by formerly colonised countries, such as in the contexts of Bandung and the NIEO. In part, it would also require that we change the terms of conversation by seeing the targets of EU GSP not as ‘beneficiaries’ but as recipients of ‘post-colonial reparative action’ as articulated by Bhambra’s (2022) decolonial project for Europe, and as ‘contributors’ to the EU economy by supplying cheap global labour and raw materials, which further aggravates extractive, rapacious, environmentally destructive practices in the global souths. Furthermore, understanding EU GSP as foreign policy through a decolonial lens requires the centring of subaltern subjectivities (strategy 4): that is, how the targets of EU GSP experience and think about the technologies and normative scripts to which they are subjected under the kind of pro-growth, industrialised, regulatory orders required to do business with the EU. Relatedly, politicising the export of EU market rules and norms would shed light on their distributional effects in a given GSP context and, therefore, lay bare the contested nature of EU entanglements in global governance by virtue of trade (strategy 3).

### **Trade and Sustainable Development Chapters in Free Trade Agreements**

If a non-ACP country reaches World Bank status as a middle-income country, it will become eligible to ‘graduate’ from GSP, which often constitutes a stepping-stone for negotiating a free trade agreement (FTA) with the EU for countries from the global souths. Since the mid-2000s, EU FTAs have entailed TSD chapters (Harrison et al. 2019). These chapters continue the logic of the GSP regarding the commitment of FTA signatories to international conventions including eight labour conventions and seven to nine multilateral environmental agreements (Nessel & Orbie 2022). However, unlike the GSP, TSD chapters constitute a ‘soft instrument’ as they embrace dialogue instead of suspension in case of violation of these commitments. These chapters have been seen as a prime example of the EU’s ‘contribution to the well-being of the world’ (Nitoui 2013) through its trade policy and accordingly attracted a remarkable amount of scholarly attention. Despite being one chapter out of 20 to 30, TSD chapters have garnered an impressive amount of interest among political science researchers, notably compared to other chapters, such as competition or intellectual property law. In this scholarly debate, one sees a dominance of positivist research and problematic historical, epistemic and culturalist avatars of Eurocentrism. The extensive literature on TSD chapters generally starts by pointing out the special character of the EU as a normative power in international trade (Poletti & Sicurelli 2018; Nessel & Orbie 2022). From this starting point, the works quickly move to a discussion on the effectiveness of these clauses in third countries (Hradilova & Svoboda 2018; Roozendaal 2019), with a traditionally mandatory opposition of EU–US approaches (Van den Putte 2015; Portella 2021). Less prominent has been the question as to how far research on TSD chapters has reinforced coloniality. Following the example of five canonical publications on this subject, we engage with three interlinked problematic tendencies in this research field, namely historical, epistemic and cultural avatars.

Research on TSD chapters generally uses the contextual framework of the events at the World Trade Organization from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s or occasionally linking to the creation of the EU in the 1950s as a starting point for investigating ethical challenges in EU bilateral trade agreements. In the former, 'failed attempts to bring a social clause into multilateral trade agreements' (Harrison et al. 2019: 260) form the historical background for their investigation (Postnikov & Bastiaens 2014; Gstöhl & De Bièvre 2017). In an example of the latter, the ethical trade discussion is linked to the 1950s and the 'trade and aid relations with EU member states' former colonies' (Martens & Orbie 2018: 287). From that point onwards, the developments and main challenges of the fair-trade doctrine are sketched.

No further attention is given to the dynamics of (de)colonisation when discussing the ethical trade doctrine, nor to the question of how far the EU has presented an ambiguous and soft position (see Orbie & Babardine 2008). However, several problems that are now associated with unsustainability in EU trade relations should in fact be associated with European colonialism and structures established during those times (McElwee 2016; Ziai 2016). Through the authors' silence on colonial aspects and on EU ambiguities in external actions, they give the impression that issues related to unsustainability are not to a large degree the result of European colonialism, but of underdevelopment. The silences foster the image of a new European trade policy, detached from colonialism (Nicolaidis & Onar-Fisher 2013; Sebhatu 2020). However, ethical concerns in European trade are not new (e.g., Bertrand 2007).

The historical starting point is also problematic as it contributes to the centring of EU trade agency to a positively connotated ethical singularity on the international level (see Bhambra 2022). The narrative is established that ethical trade concerns emerged as an ethical counterpart to the creation of the WTO in the 1990s. In fact, it implies that, prior to this date, free trade was problematic because no ethical value system channelled the market. The logic is directly visibly applied in the works of Postnikov and Bastiaens (2014) and Bastiaens and Postnikov (2017) when comparing EU-US ethical trade policy without, however, contextualising that the norms promoted in the context of TSD chapters are a product of the Western world order. Also, elsewhere, the singularity image is not challenged when asking 'whether the EU's approach to external governance of labour can be characterized as a form of (potentially significant) *normative power* focusing "on persuasion, argumentation, and the conferral of shame and prestige" rather than "coercion or solely material motivations"' (Manners 2009: 793). Testing the special character of the EU, while not pointing to the special character of others, latently suggests that other actors on the international scene are driven by ordinary interests and need the EU to govern the international system in an ethical manner.

The EU's partner in its mission to act 'as a force for good' is civil society on both sides. Research implicitly metamorphoses civil society into a highly institutionalised-technocratic tripartite between employers, employees and governments in the context of TSD chapters. The appropriateness of the tripartite to channel the costs of trading with the EU as an empire is not problematised in the five selected publications. The EU is needed to fight the injustices produced by the neoliberal West in third countries through binding rules in TSD chapters (Martens & Orbie 2018). Civil society agency remains restricted to articulate points of view within the above sketched epistemic boundaries. Whether other forms of organised contestation exist is ignored, reducing the debate on ethical trade to core labour conventions and selected multilateral environmental agreements, while ignoring the question of who is actually protected by EU trade deals. Linked to this is a common assumption that 'developing' countries are against TSD chapters. In the few cases where the positions of formerly colonised countries on TSD chapters have been studied, no larger questioning has been raised on what the 'other' understands by sustainable development and what priorities have been given to tackle unsustainable development.

Ontologically, TSD chapters are a mutual agreement attempting to make economic growth and sustainability compatible. The challenges encountered through trade agreements are in fact not specific to third countries; rather, the EU equally struggles with harmonising economic progress and sustainability. Yet the research on TSD is set on governing 'others' (Gstöhl & De Bièvre 2017: 187–189). Such culturalist boundaries fertilise discussions, where the economic-institutional effectiveness of bringing about change in third countries is the main concern. The questions look at ex-post or ex-ante changes and ways of how 'transnational communication leads civil society actors in EU PTA partner countries to learn successful strategies from their EU counterparts and pressure their state authorities to improve them' (Postnikov & Bastiaens, 2017: 927–928). Here, and also in other contributions (Martens & Orbie 2018; Harrison et al. 2019), the question is mainly whether the EU needs sanctions and pre-ratification requirements to 'develop the other' (Martens & Orbie 2018; Harrison et al. 2019). This is then opposed to the hard approach of the US, the EU's Western ally in overcoming anarchy in the international system. However, unlike the EU's imperialist other, the EU is presented as having opted for a softer non-sanctioning approach, favouring dialogue. The image solidifies that the EU does not use (military) force to pursue its goal and is hence detached from the colonial aspirations of the past. Instead, the EU's singularity is its normative trade power, which not only protects the feminised 'developing world' through TSD chapters, but also offers a way out of the poverty trap. If EU scholarship were to complexify this debate by raising questions about the special character of the EU and the supposed victimhood of civil society, the discussion on TSD chapters would be shifted. This includes an active engagement with the earlier described decolonising strategies through rehistoricising silences (strategy 2), giving 'others' more agency in expressing their positions on sustainable development (strategy 1 & 3) and changing the subjects of inquiry (strategy 4).

## **DISRUPTION AS DIALOGUE**

To overcome Eurocentric epistemic regimes implies a disruption or a dislocation of those epistemic regimes in view of generating alternative knowledges. For us, to disrupt the modes in which we study EU trade policy in a decolonial sense means to efface Eurocentric ways of seeing world politics. However, we have pitched this disruption in a dialogic manner. While it may seem indefensible at first glance to disrupt dialogically or, put differently, to dialogue disruptively, we read 'dialogue' in a polysemic sense. Firstly, decolonial thinking engages new subject-positions from which dialoguing or 'speaking across divides from different positions' can be generated (Sabaratnam 2011: 785). It chafes against the enterprise of 'knowledge production' and instead commits to 'knowledge cultivation ... [as] a certain open-ended, non-zero-sum, non-competitive logic of oxygenation from which other insights can grow or resurface' (Rutazibwa 2020: 225). From this vantage point, our aim is certainly not to usurp existing research traditions with important claims of criticality to the study of EU trade policy. Indeed, some decolonial scholars have worked to couple decolonial thought with other traditions of social critique 'as a way to move beyond universalism into forms of argumentation that are built on the possibility of a dialogue across a plurality of epistemic locations' (Icaza and Vazquez 2013: 687).

Secondly, another understanding of dialogue speaks to our shared commitment of contributing to, not displacing, extant critical approaches to EU trade policy. More broadly within heterodox approaches to the study of Europe and the EU, we hope our contribution will complicate ongoing conversations around EU trade policy in the context of the 'decolonial project for Europe' (Bhambra 2022), the 'decentring agenda' for the EU as a post-colonial power (Onar & Nicolaïdis 2013; Keukeleire & Lecocq 2018; Lecocq & Keukeleire 2023), the 'Critical European Studies' project (Bigo et al. 2020), the 'Decolonising Europe in International Politics' initiative<sup>4</sup> and the Decolonial Europe Day project.<sup>5</sup> Beyond the decolonising strategies we have advocated here, there exist more institutional/curricular impediments to address when it comes to the (geo)politics of



knowledge (see Bhambra et al. 2018; Fúnez-Flores 2022; Evans & Petropoulou Ionescu 2023). As a field, we ought to take a hard look in the mirror and ask what the problem *really* is in terms of how we teach Europe, who gets to be in our classrooms, why some research projects are considered more desirable than others, how our scholarship is judged, who gets to make this judgement, how the EU is taught and learned Eurocentrically in the global souths, and so on. More dialoguing also needs to take place around the dangers of subsuming the decolonial option under the banners of 'diversifying' and 'decentring', which are distinct intellectual undertakings. While diversifying and decentring agendas imply pluralising scholarly perspectives, they may not necessarily cohere with the political commitments of questioning and squashing colonial/modern hierarchies (for a discussion on the differences between the 'decentring' and 'decolonising' agendas in European Studies, see Orbie et al. 2023). Last but not least, we view our decolonial proposal as dialogical for it stems from a generative research partnership among differently situated scholars with different positionalities and originating from countries that are steeped in varied histories and legacies of European colonialism.

Across our reading of the GSP regime, TSD chapters and EPAs, the historical avatar of Eurocentrism permeates EU trade scholarship, flattening the histories of Europe's presumed 'others'. However, even if one would like to overcome this, the most immediate reaction would be to say: 'Yes, of course, we are not doing that because we are not historians. We are doing EU studies. We are doing political science'. So, there is a question of strictly defined scholarly boundaries. This disciplinary gatekeeping raises the question of what counts as EU trade policy scholarship. We cannot decolonise EU trade scholarship without opening the field more to other historical knowledges, which get suffocated to some extent, because they are not seen as part of the discipline despite their importance to understanding contemporary EU external relations. Indeed, how can we genuinely engage with decoloniality without recovering alternative historiographies and leaving the traditional field of European Studies? Another layer to this gatekeeping is how EU trade policy scholarship is currently defined as those studies that deal with Article 207 of the Lisbon Treaty, or as what the Trade Commissioner says and does. How academics define EU common commercial policy is a consequence of how policymakers have defined it, which is hugely problematic because academic boundaries should not be led by policy choices.

When engaging with key texts on EU trade policy, there is something striking and related to the culturalist avatar of Eurocentrism that stands out for us: an obsession with power. It reads as a Eurocentric obsession that denies the EU's imbrication in the colonial matrix of power through trade. Writings often go to great lengths to emphasise how much power, how much competence, how much leverage, how much influence and how much economic weight the EU possesses as a 'force for good' in world politics, only to conclude that the EU does not use it or that it is not entirely working out. This becomes especially evident in relation to the EU's 'performance of power' in the conditionality discourse surrounding GSP (Orbie, Alcazar III & Sioen 2022). If the EU possessed more power, they would be better off. If the EU was weaker, they would be worse off. There is a civilisational connotation to this performance of power. It is also an unwritten assumption that the EU should use its power to advance its goals. If it fails to do so, it is a problem. If it manages to do so, all is well. Then, it is backed up with the narrative of international anarchy or of the 'jungle' out there where the EU's presence is needed to weed out and solve problems.

Problematically, the epistemic avatar of Eurocentrism manifests itself within seemingly unshakeable ways of seeing the EU as a global trade actor in terms of the normative power Europe (NPE) thesis (Manners 2002). Of course, the EU still fashions itself as a distinctly normative trade actor in world politics. But it has also increasingly presented itself as a realist, interest-driven, pragmatic actor of late, especially in the context of the geopoliticisation of EU trade policy (e.g., Meunier and Nicolaidis 2019; Borrell 2021; Olsen 2022). This literature, however, tends to accentuate so-called 'great power' politics. It

neglects to consider how the EU continues to exploit trade policy as a way to (re)organise its relations with the global souths. These hierarchical relations of power must also be read *geopolitically*, that is, from the perspectives of the very 'targets' of EU trade policy, especially those deemed to be 'the most in need' (Alcazar III (forthcoming) 2024).

Since the Global Strategy of 2016 and the Trade Policy Review of 2021, the EU has more overtly stressed the language of enforcement, the language of enforceability, the language of coercion and the language of assertiveness when it comes to the GSP regime but also TSD chapters. Yet the EU has long been seen as coercive, aggressive and assertive especially in its pursuit of EPAs. Coercion operates through the EU's staging of EPAs as a means to enforce norms, stricter monitoring exercises and political conditionalities (Hurt 2003: 163). The EU also threatens that it will demote African 'partner' countries to the less preferential GSP regime if they do not ratify and implement EPAs with the EU (Langan 2018, 141). In 2013, in the context of the EU forcing an end to the EPA negotiations, Namibia's trade minister voiced 'dissatisfaction with a negotiating partner taking precipitous unilateral economic action against a more vulnerable side whilst we are in the process of negotiations. This is simply not in the spirit of partnership, fair play or equity' (Schlettwein 2013).

One discerns a more pronounced realist language that is being articulated slowly by the EU trade policy establishment and maybe even more slowly in EU trade relations with so-called 'developing' countries. To be clear, this 'new' geopolitical discourse, just like the NPE thesis, is tinged with strong pretensions of Europeans being more civilised and being in an exemplary position for other societies to emulate. Geopolitical Europe is legitimised by virtue of the 'special' character of the EU in the world.

We could think of these seemingly contending discourses as a triangle. On the one hand: normative power Europe. On the other: geopolitical Europe. Some — the present authors included — often think about the geopoliticisation of EU trade policy as if it is a shift from the normativisation of EU trade policy. Before, we had an 'ethical' trade policy under Cecilia Malmström, a more interest-driven one under Karel De Gucht, a more ethical one again in terms of harnessing globalisation under Pascal Lamy, and a more interest-driven, neoliberal one under Sir Leon Brittan. We might speak of a kind of pendulum oscillating between values and interests, values and interests. This pendulum is superficial because it distracts attention from something more fundamental, relatively constant, relatively unchangeable: coloniality. We could consider the decolonial option as transcending the 'values versus interests' divide because it directs our anticolonial gaze to both the normative and realist dimensions. Thinking decolonially challenges both dimensions because they co-constitute one another in perpetuating the coloniality of the EU in world politics. For proponents of the geopoliticisation narrative, EU trade policy seems now implicitly absolved from the sins of colonialism and *mission civilisatrice*. Therefore, dwelling on these sins might be tantamount to flogging a dead horse. Geopolitics is geopolitics. Yet this thinking is flawed, as we have attempted, from a decolonial perspective, to unmask.

In thinking through the coloniality of the EU as a global trade power, disrupting the Eurocentrism within EU trade policy studies demands a deep-seated shift in perspective, an unflinching disavowal of this pendulum thinking by genuinely engaging with other ways of knowing and being. If we were genuinely committed to changing the site of enunciation, would it not follow that the EU's trade relations with the global souths could and should be known differently?

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to one anonymous reviewer and all participants of the 'Disrupting European Studies' online workshop, and in particular to the editors of this special issue, for helpful feedback on an earlier draft. We are indebted to Beatrix Futák-Campbell, Daniela Sicurelli, Mark Langan, and Nadia Jones-Galiani for engaging with our working paper as panel discussants in different academic conferences. We also wish to thank the UACES team and the DIMES project for hosting us in Lille and for making our participation possible at the 52<sup>nd</sup> European Studies Conference there. All lapses and misinterpretations remain ours and ours alone.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Tellingly, the special issues on the contemporary politics of EU trade policy that we have shortlisted are silent on GSP, TSD and EPAs.

<sup>2</sup> We use the notion of 'policy worlds' to stress that policies are embedded in and through particular socio-political realms. As Shore and Wright (2011: 1) put it: 'Policies are not simply external, generalised or constraining forces, nor are they confined to texts. Rather, they are productive, performative and continually contested. A policy finds expression through sequences of events; it creates new social and semantic spaces, new sets of relations, new political subjects, and new webs of meaning'.

<sup>3</sup> The (Silent) Voices from the Field collective at the Governance in Conflict Network rethinks transnational field research practices in development and (post)conflict studies by advancing a research ethos based on open dialogue and partnership: <https://www.gicnetwork.be/silent-voices-about/>.

<sup>4</sup> This initiative is convened by Beste İşleyen and Tasniem Anwar at the Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam: <https://aces.uva.nl/content/news/2020/06/decolonising-europe.html?cb>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://decolonial.eu/>

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