Global norms and European power

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Introduction

The Union’s action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law.

(The Lisbon Treaty, Title V, Chapter 1, Art. 21)

The ambitions of the European Union as a global power are explicitly made with reference to universal norms and principles. It could be argued that these claims provide an important justification and legitimacy for the EU’s power aspirations. They also express a cosmopolitan worldview that envisages a transformation of international relations towards a more institutionalised order in which the ‘power of rights’ surpasses the ‘rights of power’. Paradoxically, the EU’s ambitions to carve out a role for itself on the international stage ultimately imply the embedding, and thereby taming of European power within a thick web of multilateral and inter-organisational arrangements. To many observers, this self-binding through international law is what makes the EU a normative actor (Diez, 2005: 636; Sjursen, 2006b: 244).

This normative self-conception is widespread among European policy-makers (Bengtsson and Elgström, 2011; Carta, 2008). The academic debate on European global power is not so much a contestation of this descriptive role conception, but the consequences this role has for the EU as an international actor. Robert Kagan (2003) and Ian Manners (2008b) could both be said to agree on the Kantian, post-modern principles on which the EU is founded, but they would deeply disagree with one another on the significance this normative foundation has for its power in the world.

The contested academic debate about norms and European power has a long pedigree, dating back to the early 1970s, when François Duchêne (1972) coined the notion of civilian power to describe the distinctive character of Europe as an international actor; only to be challenged by Hedley Bull (1982) who found the concept a ‘contradiction in terms’. Over the last decade, the debate has become reinvigorated, but also more polarised, since Ian Manners

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First launched the idea of ‘normative power Europe’ (NPE). The academic debate is grounded within a larger IR discussion between constructivists and realists on the role of norms in international relations (Checkel, 1998, 2005; Fierke and Jørgensen, 2001; Reus-Smit, 1999). There is an interesting parallel to be drawn between the current academic debates on European global power and the so-called ‘First Great Debate’ in IR between idealists and realists that took place in the inter-war years over the League of Nations. Some would argue that the debate about European global power has been obsessed with theorising, at the expense of more grounded empirical studies of the EU’s global role (K. E. Smith, 2011: 336). However, when surveying the literature, it can be noted that there has been a steady growth of empirical case studies that try to empirically examine the key assumptions that these various concepts of European power contain.

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of both the theoretical and empirical literature that deals with global norms and European power. The literature tends to revolve around five key questions:

- Does the pursuit of global norms in foreign policy make the EU a distinctive actor in world politics?
- Are the norms that the EU subscribes to universal or particularistic?
- To what extent do these normative objectives and principles guide and inform EU performance in global politics? Do they predispose the EU towards an instinctive and reflexive mode of multilateralism in foreign policy?
- Does the EU’s pursuit of norms hold power? What impact does an EU foreign policy based on normative principles have on external actors and the international system?

To provide an overview of how these questions have been addressed in the academic literature, the chapter is structured into four main parts. The first two parts are located at the theoretical level, which reveal deep ontological and epistemological divides along three dimensions: (1) idealism – materialism; (2) the purposes of normative theorising; and (3) universalism – particularism. The following third and fourth parts provide an overview of the methods and empirical approaches that have been used to examine the EU’s performance and impact on a range of issues and policies in world politics.

The power of rights and the rights of power

The academic debate on norms and European power is divisive and marked by different ‘camp’ mentalities, depending on specific theoretical and methodological orientations. In some ways, this is not surprising, given that theories contain assumptions and prescriptions about how the world is constituted. For instance, Bull (1982) and Duchêne (1972) did not disagree on the empirical description of the EC as a civilian power, but in their contending prescriptions of whether civilian power made the EC a powerful actor in global politics or not. While Duchêne (1972) envisaged a future in which international relations increasingly become domesticated and ‘civilised’, through the strengthening of the rule of law (modelled in the image of the EC), Bull (1982) concluded that without hard military power, the EU would remain a weak international actor in a world of power politics. While the debate on European power has moved well beyond the binary conception of civilian – military power, the idealist – materialist dimension still permeates the variety of positions taken in the debate and crucially determines whether the EU is considered a transformative superpower (Leonard, 2005; McCormick, 2007), or indeed a ‘tragic’, small power at best (Hyde-Price, 2008; Toje, 2010).
Not surprisingly, the literature that stresses the distinctive and normative power of the European Union links these arguments with deeper transformations in the international system, where the power of ideas and rights are pivotal. The ‘power of rights’ implies a legalistic perspective of international relations that points to the growth of international agreements that strengthen individual rights (Falk, 2008; Held and Mepham, 2007; Kaldor, Martin and Selchow, 2007). The EU’s accession to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), as stipulated in the Lisbon Treaty (Art. 6), could be seen as the legal embodiment of this transformative development of a ‘power of rights’.

The concept of ‘normative power Europe’ (NPE) is closely associated with this cosmopolitan worldview. It envisages the emergence of a new global agenda, where universal norms progressively become a central feature of international relations (Diez, 2005; Orbie and Tortell, 2008; Manners, 2002, 2008b; Scheipers and Sicurelli, 2007; Sjursen, 2006b). This worldview opens up the prospects of a world beyond the nation-state. Hence, the claim made by Manners (2009) that the concept of NPE invites a different type of theorising of agency, power and policy in world politics (Diez and Manners, 2007). Normative power is ‘power of an ideational nature characterised by common principles and a willingness to disregard Westphalian conventions’ (Manners, 2002: 239). In this sense, the European Union plays a powerful role in shaping the discourse of what is considered ‘normal’ in world politics (Manners, 2008b; Maull, 2005). To be a normative power assumes that other actors will want to emulate the norms for which the Union stands for and the example that it sets.

It is precisely this transformative worldview and non-materialist dimension of European power that has been the source of much of the academic debate. The central charge is that the NPE concept overlooks the continued persistence of traditional patterns of power politics and the ‘rights of power’ (Hyde-Price, 2006; Toje, 2011). The international law professor, Richard Falk (Falk, 2008: 81–82) somberly argues that ‘rights of power prevail over the power of rights almost always when strategic interests of major state actors are at stake, and this is true whether the orientation toward world politics reflects a realist or a liberal internationalist persuasion’. By this he means that major powers will either disregard or alternatively use the discourse of ‘power of rights’ instrumentally to legitimise their behaviour and policy. Either way, it puts strict limits on the kind of transformation envisaged in the NPE literature and stresses a materialist understanding of power in the international system.

With the ascent of emerging new powers in the international system, there has been a growing body of literature that reflects this materialist worldview. One could even talk of a revival of more realist thinking on European power (Hyde-Price, 2006, 2008; Rynning, 2011; Toje, 2010, 2011; Zimmerman, 2007). However, several other scholars have a more liberal and multi-faceted view of power (Howorth, 2010; Biscop, 2005; Biscop and Andersson, 2008; Mayer, 2008; Smith, 2011; Zielonka, 2008). Tim Dunne (2008), for instance, explicitly seeks to bridge the ‘power of rights’ with the ‘rights of power’ in his ethical conception of ‘Good Citizen Europe’. However, what loosely unites all these scholars is a more power political outlook of international relations, which leads to arguments that the EU needs to develop a ‘grand strategy’ to pursue its norms and interests in the world. This strategic mindset would sit uneasily with the concept of NPE, as it is considered to be alluding to ‘great power’ patterns and practices (Diez and Manners, 2007).

Contesting normative power

Normative power has proven to be another essentially contested concept in European political analysis. The conceptual vagueness derives from the variety of ways it has been analysed, ranging from a universalist force for good (Aggestam, 2008b; Lucarelli and Manners, 2006; Sjursen, 2006a),
to soft imperialism (Hettne and Söderbaum, 2005; Zielonka, 2008), to even considering it in terms coercive despotism (Börzel and Risse, 2007; De Zutter, 2010). The controversy is not that an actor like the EU pursues norms in its foreign policy, but rather the claim that the EU, by subscribing to these norms, possesses power (Keane, 2008). However, moving beyond the idealist–materialist discussion of normative power, this part of the chapter will discuss another two problems associated with the analysis of norms and European power, namely (1) approaches to normative theorising, and (2) the meaning of global norms.

Firstly, one reason why the academic debate on European power has become more polarised is that scholars approach normative theorising in different ways. Andrew Hurrell (2002: 137) suggests that normative theory addresses distinct questions:

- What impact do norms and values have on foreign policy?
- What ought we do?
- Given the realities of political life, what can be done?

All three questions are represented in the literature on norms and European power. The literature on ‘normative power Europe’ is explicitly interested in developing a new research agenda that also provides answers to the question of what the EU ought to do in world politics (Manners, 2008b: 45). The work on Europe as a strategic power, on the other hand, while also partly prescriptive, aspires more to address the third question of what ‘is’ (Hyde-Price, 2008; Smith, 2011; Howorth, 2010). Most theories and concepts of European power will stipulate some kind of hypothesis of what impact norms and values have on foreign policy (question one). The problem for the student of European power is that most of the conceptual approaches more or less conflate empirical, analytical and normative definitions in their analyses (Forsberg, 2011).

Second, there is an interconnection between how norms are defined and the way in which European power is conceived. Not surprisingly, the literature that is more openly normative about the role the EU should be playing on the global stage, justifies this power position from the basis that norms are universal, or at least universalisable (Biscop, 2005; Dunne, 2008; Leonard, 2005; Manners, 2002; Sjursen, 2006a). A central assumption is that the European Union embodies post-Westphalian values that others wish to emulate, which include the prime principle of sustainable peace, the key principles of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, as well as the values of equality, social solidarity, sustainable development and good governance (Manners, 2009: 3). The importance attached to these principles expresses optimism about the possibility of achieving constitutional features of liberty at the international level. By simply existing as a different kind of hybrid actor, the EU plays a key role in changing the norms of international society. The concept of European normative power is premised on ultimate system change, from ‘Westphalian self-regarding’ to ‘post-Westphalian other-regarding’ (Manners, 2008a: 60).

The pursuit of these universal values is therefore also considered a moral duty and responsibility implying a more active role in norm-diffusion (Dunne, 2008). Universal values are ‘global public goods’ that every individual is entitled to (Biscop, 2008). The relevant community for moral action is therefore not delimited to EU citizens but humanity at large (Nicolaidis and Howse, 2002: 773). This distinctive perspective is evident in the literature that deals with the security-development nexus and EU human security, which makes explicit reference to individuals, rather than states, as the moral referent object of security (Biscop, 2005; Haaland-Matlary, 2008; Kaldor et al., 2007).

Importantly, the legitimacy of this normative power is conceived as arising from its universal origins in the UN Charter, the Helsinki Final Act and a string of Declarations and Conventions on Human Rights (Manners, 2009: 3). This claim to universality forms a central plank in the
defence against the charges that the European Union is a post-imperialist power projecting European values (Diez, 2005). The normative justification arises from the fact that the principles that are practiced and projected in EU external relations have first been agreed within the UN and thereafter been incorporated into EU treaties.

However, some scholars have questioned these universalist assumptions about EU norms, and they are not all realists (Aggestam, 2008b; Bicchi, 2006; Diez, 2005; Pace, 2007; Richmond, 2006; Zielonka, 2008). Normative power assumes that other actors will want to emulate the norms for which the Union stands and the example that it sets. This is where the central thesis of normative power shaping definitions of normality originates — that is, the attraction and presumed acceptance by others of the values that the EU projects and promotes. Critics tend to point to three problems here: Firstly, the pivotal role attributed to the EU’s role in norm-diffusion projects a view of others in need of change. Secondly, it implies an endorsement of European definitions of the common good in international society. Thirdly, the NPE perspective assumes norms to be void of interests (Forsberg, 2011; Laidi, 2008; Menon, 2009; Youngs, 2004).

Several scholars see a problem with the image of the EU as a universal role model and example (Bicchi, 2006; Mayer, 2008). The problem with this ambition to shape the world in Europe’s image is that it is based on an assumption that European values and ways of doing things are intrinsically superior and a view of others in need of change. According to Federica Bicchi (Bicchi, 2006: 299), this leads to an unreﬂexive and conservative attitude, which is why she portrays the EU as a ‘civilizing power’ in its promotion of regionalism.

From a pluralist and realist perspective, normative power means something distinctively different, given the assumption that values are ultimately rooted in distinct cultural communities. Hence, a global consensus on universal values is nigh on impossible and sets clear limits (Hyde-Price, 2008). This cultural diversity is a ‘practical and moral barrier to the pursuit of collective moral purposes other than maintaining order’ (Dunne, 2008: 21). This cleavage in understanding global norms leads to different assumptions about what kind of foreign policy we can expect of the EU (Jørgensen, 2006b). For this reason, Helene Sjursen (2006c: 86) makes a distinction between a value-based foreign policy (promoting the values of a particular community) from a rights-based foreign policy that explicitly seeks to promote universal global principles. Whether the European Union is considered an imperialist power (Hettne and Söderbaum, 2005; Zielonka, 2008) or a transformationalist force for good in the international system, crucially hinges on these distinctions.

**Normative performance**

A major pre-occupation in the literature has been the question whether the normative identity of the EU is reﬂected in its performance as an international actor. Does the EU act normatively according to the principles and norms it claims to support? In other words, is the EU’s role conception as a normative power reﬂected in its international role performance? Again, the literature is divided here in terms of understanding the type of behaviour the EU exhibits as an international actor and norm-diffuser, much of it premised on the theoretical definitions adopted in terms of norms and power discussed above. The main points of contestation revolve around two issues:

- Does the EU’s normative identity predispose it to act in a distinctive normative way?
- Is normative behaviour divorced from self-interested strategic action?

To begin with, the problem is what we understand as normative behaviour. Michele Pace (2007) suggests that for EU policy to be considered norm-driven, it has to demonstrate some kind of
patterned, observable continuity over time in support of specific norms. A common criticism of EU foreign policy is that it is inconsistent and exhibits double standards in the way norms are applied (Jurado, 2006; Smith, 2006: 168). This is particularly the case in the various external policies of the European Union, which is why Meunier and Nicolaidis (2006: 922), for instance, argue that the EU cannot become a normative power through trade given the protectionism of some of its policies. The lack of a principled EU policy on democracy promotion is another frequent case referred to by scholars studying the Middle East and North Africa (Pace, 2007, 2009; Panebianco, 2006; Powel, 2009; Seeberg, 2009).

A value-based foreign policy does not necessarily generate a road map for what is considered appropriate normative behaviour (Aggestam, 2008b: 10). Not only do normative considerations have to be weighed against wider strategic issues, but normative principles themselves may conflict. Sometimes choices have to be made between alternatives, both of which are morally ambiguous. While there may be consensus among EU member states on abstract principles, agreement on what is appropriate foreign policy behaviour in specific political situations may prove more elusive. EU policy towards the Darfur crisis in Sudan has demonstrated many of these characteristics.

To be a normative power does not necessarily imply a one-dimensional emphasis on ideational sources of power per se (De Zutter, 2010). The central point of contestation in the literature on European normative power is the choice of instruments used for norm-diffusion. In principle, it could be argued that a normative actor may exhibit behaviour on a wide spectrum, from various forms of military and economic coercion to socialisation, suasion and emulation (Börzel and Risse, 2007). The choice of instruments for norm-diffusion (material and/or immaterial) does, however, determine the performance of a role.

The central claim in the literature on ‘Normative Power Europe’ (NPE) is that this concept essentially relies on ideational power without direct links to economic and military resources. As Ian Manners (2009: 2) makes clear: ‘its use involves normative justification rather than the use of material incentives, or physical force. It is ideological in character, meaning that power resides in the ability to impose meanings on the material world through the power of ideas and over opinion’ (Manners, 2002: 239). According to Manners and Whitman (2003: 239), this is what makes the EU such a different kind of normative power. The uni-dimensional (non-materialist) analysis of European power is also what makes the concept of NPE distinct from civilian power, which strongly resembles in normative terms (on civilian power, see Maull, 2000, 2005; Whitman, 1998).

Consequently, we would expect behaviour, in the case of NPE, to be more diffuse as it in many cases involves symbolic action and persuasion. Indeed, the NPE literature suggests a particular repertoire of normative action that involves the rejection of a number of key assumptions that are traditionally made in regard to foreign policy strategy, interests and outcomes. Diez and Manners (2007) explicitly discard the idea that European normative power should be part of a toolbox to achieve European foreign policy interests. This would undermine the holistic, ‘outside-the-box’ thinking that NPE supposedly encourages (Manners, 2002: 244; 2009: 4). This purist view of ideational power is based on insights that different forms of power may generate contradictory foreign policy behaviour. The development of an EU military power capability, in particular, is seen by several scholars to potentially undermine the ideational impact of the Union (Manners, 2002; Smith, 2005). It is worth recalling in this context that much of the conceptual thinking on NPE took place when George W. Bush was president of the United States. One can hence detect the underlying ‘other’ against which Europe’s identity and normative vision of world politics has been articulated in academic and policy discourse. In contrast to a coercive imposition of norms, Manners (2002, 2009: 3) envisions a different type of normative performance by the European Union, which involves:
- persuasion and argumentation;
- invoking norms;
- shaping the discourse
- showing example; and
- conferral of prestige or shame.

These actions are conceived as normative actions in and of themselves and form part of
the cosmopolitan approach to international law and multilateralism expressed in the NPE literature
(Diez, 2005: 636; Sjursen, 2006b: 244). For instance, persuasion and shaming as normative forms of
action, take on a completely different meaning when linked to material incentives that would
result in a more overt coercive behaviour.

A number of studies have provided supporting empirical evidence for this type of normative
behaviour by the European Union. Ian Manners (2002, 2008a) himself crafted his seminal article
on NPE based on a detailed empirical study of the EU’s efforts to abolish the death penalty
internationally. This case study demonstrated norm-driven practices by the EU on bilateral and
multilateral levels that did not simply serve narrow European interests, but were justified with
reference to global norms. Similarly, Scheipers and Sicurelli (2007) found supporting evidence that
the self-representation of the EU as a normative power was reflected in EU performance on the
issues of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Kyoto Protocol. This legalistic
approach to international agreements has also been widely studied in terms of EU leadership in
the climate change negotiations (Falkner et al., 2010; Parker and Karlsson, 2010; Vogler, 2005).

In an effort to systematically explore EU normative identity and performance in external
relations, the volume edited by Elgström and Smith (2006) offers a broad overview by way of
using role theory analysis. Sociological role theory is concerned with understanding the nor-
mative context of behaviour that goes beyond strategic, self-interested action (Aggestam, 2006;
Harnish, Frank, and Maull, 2011). As one would expect, individual chapters outline a variety of
role performances, depending on the specific context, issues and policy
field. Several chapters
elaborate on EU role performance as a multilateral actor (Damro, 2006; Jørgensen, 2006a;
Lucarelli, 2006). Another common theme of the volume is that the EU has developed a more
proactive role performance in support of human rights and democracy promotion since the end
of the Cold War, although the pattern of behaviour is rather inconsistent (Panebianco, 2006;
Sedelmeier, 2006; Smith, 2006).

The general picture emerging from empirical studies of EU foreign policy behaviour is that it
tends to be mixed in terms of normative and strategic considerations, and that the EU increasingly
draws on a comprehensive range of instruments for norm-diffusion. The notion that European
normative power simply rests on ideational sources of influence has always been contested in
the literature. Knud Erik Jørgensen (2006a: 31–32), for instance, argues that the EU, far from
being a reflexive multilateralist actor, shows significant variation in its role performance, which
also includes unilateral and bilateral approaches, depending on the issues, actors and context (see

Indeed, there is an evident shift in academic studies of European power that analytically and
prescriptively emphasise a more strategic discourse – even a ‘grand strategy’ for the EU (Biscop
and Coelmont, 2011; Howorth, 2010; Smith, 2011). In many ways, this is reflective of new
capabilities and instruments being developed and integrated at the European level. This in turn
can be seen as a response to two events that has been constitutive to the repertoire of EU role
performances as an international actor, namely EU enlargement and war in the Balkans.

First, while EU enlargement in many ways can be considered a success story of the EU’s
normative power of attraction (Aggestam, 2008a), several scholars will also point to how the
enlargement negotiations cemented a new range of conditional EU action to promote normative principles, such as human rights, minority rights and good governance (Sedelmeier, 2006). According to Jan Zielonka (2008: 476), EU normative power was not primarily exercised through persuasion and normative justification, but through a skilful application of political and economic conditionality. Conditionality introduces more overt linkages between normative principles and material instruments of power (Grabbe, 2006; Le Gloannec and Rupnik, 2008; Noutcheva, 2009; Vachudova, 2005). This shift in power political behaviour has also been noted in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (Barbé and Nogues-Johansson, 2008; Bengtsson, 2008: Whitman and Wolf, 2010).

Second, the feebleness of European action in response to the serious challenges of violence in the Balkans in the 1990s underscored the necessity of being able to draw on a comprehensive range of power resources, including the military one. The development of a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and a European Security Strategy (ESS) reflects the growing ambitions of the European Union as an international actor. While not necessarily implying a major change in terms of the EU’s normative ethos, it does suggest a change in terms of how ideational and material power is conceived and to what effect. To some scholars, this development of a military capability will enable the European Union a more active role in promoting norms internationally (Biscop and Coelmont, 2011; Stavridis, 2001, Whitman, 2006), while other scholars take a less sanguine view (Smith, 2005; Diez, 2005; Diez and Manners, 2007; Manners, 2002).

The emphasis on the strategic nature of European power in more recent publications has also renewed the question about the relationship between norms and interests in EU foreign policy (Bailes, 2008; Meyer and Strickmann, 2011; Laidi, 2008; Youngs, 2004; Thomas, 2011). Most analysts tend to agree that norms and interests are deeply interlinked and that the EU has a self-interest in spreading its norms (Zielonka, 2008: 480). However, the original claim made by Manners (2002) was that European normative power was distinctive precisely because it provided evidence of a pattern of behaviour beyond instrumental, self-interested action (see also Diez and Manners, 2007). The methodological challenge, largely unresolved, is how it is decisively determined whether EU action is driven by underlying material interests or normative ends (Forsberg, 2011).

What is clear from surveying more recent literature on European power is that the strategic and interest-based dimension of EU action is attracting increasing attention (Bailes, 2008; Biscop and Coelmont, 2011; Grevi and Khandekar, 2011). Importantly, this is taking place at a time when a new policy discourse of Europe’s decline in a multipolar world is taking hold, which suggests the resurgence of ‘rights of power’ in the international system. The argument is that in those instances where norms and interests do not easily coexist, the choice will become starker and more evident. Several studies are already suggesting that there is evidence that core normative values and principles increasingly are becoming sidelined in a number of EU external policies, particularly on issues related to migration, energy and security (Bailes, 2008: 118–19; Mayer, 2008: 70; Youngs, 2010). A realist interpretation would make the point that this is a logical consequence given that norms are ‘second-order’ issues (Hyde-Price, 2008). Paradoxically, this leads a number of scholars to depict the European Union as a ‘normal’ power (Woods, 2009) or ‘realist actor in normative clothes’ (Seeberg, 2009; see also Ruffa, 2011). Given the epistemological problems that realist theory traditionally has had in conceptualising a non-state actor like the EU, the question is whether this is another ‘contradiction in terms’ in studies of European power.

**Normative effectiveness and impact**

To hold normative power implies that the European Union has significant impact on external actors and the international system. According to Manners (2002, 2011), EU power
resides primarily in the symbolic expression of what the EU normatively stands for – what it *is* – rather than what it says or does. This pivotal assumption is, however, the least examined in the literature on NPE and has led to the charge that the EU projects an ‘EUtopia’ rather than the EU as it *is* (Nicolaidis and Howse, 2002). Part of the problem is the methodological challenge how to systematically investigate normative power that spreads diffusively like a ‘contagion’ (Manners, 2002) or ‘water on stone’ (Manners, 2008b). The long timescale and the kind of action in which the EU is envisaged to engage make it difficult to evaluate the normative effectiveness and impact of the EU with certainty (Manners, 2008a). In some ways, it overlaps with some of the problems associated with the evaluation of EU foreign policy success and failure (Jørgensen, 1998; Ginsberg and Smith, 2007).

Three approaches to the study of the EU’s normative impact can be found in the literature. The first approach explores the question of the EU’s impact in terms of external perceptions of the European Union as a global actor (Lucarelli and Fioramonti, 2010). To hold power arguably requires *recognition* from other international actors of the EU’s normative role. External recognition is particularly important for a normative power with universal, cosmopolitan ambitions as it provides the EU with the ideational legitimacy it yearns for in its effort to promote a set of global norms and principles. While the research agenda is still in its infancy in this specific field of research (Lucarelli, 2007: 258), case studies seem to suggest a considerable gap between the EU’s self-image as a normative power when contrasted to the perceptions held by external actors. While there is some limited recognition among political elites of the role the EU plays as a multilateral actor and model of regional integration, the EU is more frequently associated with ideas of a neo-liberal actor or protectionist power focused on pursuing its own interests (Chaban et al., 2006). In a major research project on the external perceptions of the EU, Lucarelli (2007: 269) said ‘not find much evidence of the EU being widely seen as a ‘normative power’ exporting universal values of democracy and human rights’. A similar conclusion is drawn in another research project focusing on EU–Pacific relations that found a significant gap in external and self-images of the EU as a promoter of democracy, rule of law and human rights (Holland and Chaban, 2011). Elgström (2008) in turn confirmed this gap between external and internal role conceptions when examining the EU’s partnership agreements with developing countries.

Given the strategic shift in concepts of European power in response to the shifting balance of power in the international system, it is interesting to note the external role perceptions. Tatiana Romanova (2009) observes that the Russian government either ignores or explicitly questions the EU’s normative ambitions, particularly challenging EU definitions of norms and values. With the rise of Russian power globally, this criticism of EU normative power is raised with increasing confidence (Romanova, 2009: 51). A more multi-faceted view of European power seems to emerge from China, which is described as a ‘maturing partnership’ (Peruzzi, Poletti and Zhang, 2007). The EU has been increasingly recognised as a potential partner in Chinese official discourse when it comes to multilateralism, although it is doubtful that Chinese officials share the same understanding of the term when compared with EU emphasis on ‘effective multilateralism’ (Peruzzi, Poletti and Zhang, 2007: 329). However, like Russia, China questions EU definitions of global norms and principles, particularly on human rights and democracy (Wang, 2009). In the case of Brazil and India, empirical studies suggest that at least rhetorically, there is an emphasis on shared values and partnership in reforming global governance structures, particularly within the UN. However, these external perceptions do not translate to recognising the EU as a normative power and are largely overshadowed by the strategic interests held by the political elites in India and Brazil (Fioramonti, 2007; Poletti, 2007).

The second strand of literature explores more specifically the impact the European Union has had in strengthening and transforming international law-making and institution-building. This
could be considered evidence of European power in shaping ‘normality’ in international relations. Several studies have examined this question in terms of EU leadership in multilateral negotiations and diplomacy. Scheipers and Sicurelli (2007) show in their studies how the EU actively sought to promote multilateral agreements on the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Kyoto Protocol; a clear example of normative self-binding behaviour and attempts to diffuse global norms (see also Thomas, 2011; Vogler, 2011). However, while the EU can be attributed with some success in keeping the issues on the international agenda, it is less clear that the EU had a normative impact on the final outcome (Bengtsson and Elgström, 2011; Scheipers and Sicurelli, 2008). Human rights at the UN have been another prominent issue attracting attention, given the explicit commitment by the EU to promote human rights and support the United Nations. Although the EU can be credited for having a normative impact in terms of driving the agenda for approval of the International Criminal Court and the Responsibility to Protect at the UN (Brantner and Gowan, 2008: 83), there is a consensus in the literature that the EU’s normative impact has been limited and indeed is openly contested by members of the so-called Global South. Importantly, this is happening despite an impressive record of the EU acting as a single bloc (Smith, 2010a; see also Laatikainen and Smith, 2006).

Finally, the third approach to the question of the EU’s impact as a normative power can be studied in terms of the evidence that other actors’ practices and identities have changed as a consequence of adopting a set of norms promoted by the EU. That the European Union has had a normative impact, particularly through EU enlargement, is not doubted (Grabbe, 2006; Sedelmeier, 2005). What the core contestation is about is whether this is happening as a consequence of the ideational impact of the EU (normative justification), whereby actors internalise norms and ideas (social learning), or whether it is a result of strategic learning based on material incentives (Checkel, 2001). Again, there are methodological challenges here in terms of determining exactly why norm-diffusion takes place (Björkdahl, 2005). Several studies suggest that European normative power is limited beyond enlargement (Barbé and Johansson-Nogués, 2008; Johansson-Nogués, 2007; Noutcheva, 2009; Popescu and Wilson, 2011). Further afield, Scheipers and Sicurelli (2008: 619) found that despite concerted efforts by the EU to promote African countries to be actively involved in the negotiations over the ICC and the climate change negotiations, through partnership and solidarity, the effectiveness and impact of EU normative power was limited, particularly when faced by a competing power in the region. Similar conclusions have been drawn from studies of the Euro–Mediterranean partnership (Bicchi, 2006; Panebianco, 2006) and the irony is not lost on many that the Arab uprising of 2011 has not been attributed to the normative power of Europe.

Concluding remarks

The unique character of the European Union as a global actor inspires theoretical musings about what makes it distinctive and significant to our understandings of international politics. Over the last decade, there has been a thriving academic debate about Europe as a normative power. Although this is a debate with considerable epistemological divides, it is a clear sign of how this particular field of European Studies has matured by also engaging with wider debates within the discipline of International Relations. In many ways, the essentially contested definitions of European power and norms are a microcosm of broader theoretical debates in IR. A survey of the literature indicates a fruitful exchange in both directions. Several IR scholars have started to engage in and contribute to studies of the EU as a global normative actor, thereby reducing the risk of a silo effect within European studies.
The descriptive self-representation of the EU as a normative power is not disputed per se. What is deeply contested is whether this identity is significant to how the European Union acts in global politics and whether the EU has a normative impact. The answers arising from the literature to these questions are to a significant extent premised on different theoretical world-views; that is, whether a transformation towards a ‘power of rights’ is envisaged in international society, or whether materialist conceptions of a ‘rights of power’ trump explanations of the performance and effectiveness of the European Union as a normative actor.

While theorising European normative power has been lively, if also divisive, there has been a steady output of more empirically-driven studies of the European Union as a normative actor that have not received as much attention as they perhaps deserve. However, they represent an important empirical field that has sought to ‘test’ the general theoretical accounts made of the EU as a power. It is interesting to note that empirical findings tend to gravitate towards a consensus on two broad conclusions. Firstly, that the European Union does indeed demonstrate normative performance, as envisaged in the NPE-literature, but that this tends to be inconsistent and mixed with more strategic material considerations. Secondly, the majority of studies point to the fact that the impact of the European Union as a normative power, in terms of external actors and the international system, is restricted and limited.

Indeed, several studies show a considerable gap between the self-image of Europe as a normative power and external perceptions held by actors in the international system. So far, this is the least investigated aspect of Europe as a normative power, but should raise some very interesting questions for the future. The emerging discourse of a Europe in decline and of new power constellations in the international system is likely to shift the emphasis on studies of Europe as a global actor. We now start to see the contours of a new research agenda evolving, which puts greater emphasis on the inter-subjective, relational dimension of European power – how the ego- and alter role conceptions interact and change dynamically over time – as originally suggested by Alexander Wendt (1999) in his social theory of international politics.

Notes

1 There is some evidence that citizens in Europe would support such a role, see Ekman, 2006.
2 On the distinction between ‘power of rights’ and ‘rights of power’, see Falk, 2008.
3 See Smith (Smith, 2005) for a sophisticated discussion of the EU as a civilian and military power.
4 Mauill (Mauill, 2005) prefers to talk of the EU as a normative ‘force’ rather than power.
5 In the constructivist IR literature, this is referred to as a ‘productive power’ (Adler, 2005: 103).

References


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