

Power and the EU: From Superman to Jackson Pollock¹

“Today’s conventional portrait of international politics too often ends up looking like a superman comic strip, whereas it probably should resemble a Jackson Pollock”
(C. Enloe, 1996).

“Le pouvoir, ça n’existe pas... Le pouvoir, c’est en réalité des relations, un faisceau plus ou moins organisé, plus ou moins coordonné de relations » (1977 – ‘Le jeu de Michel Foucault’ in *Dits et Ecrits*, t. II, Quarto/Gallimard, 2001, p. 302).

Power is the currency of world politics. In fact, it seems like this is the one thing on which students of international relations theory can agree on: power is a pivotal element in the conceptualisation one can make on the role and relations of actors on the international scene. However, this does not actually say much on what is meant by ‘power’. Indeed, the notion is problematic as it involves questions of quantitative capacity, legitimacy, perception, interests and ideas. No scholar will articulate or hierarchize these different elements in the same way.

It seems however that the notion of power is increasingly accepted to be relational. The end of the Cold War liberated a notion that had been trapped in rigid, structural categories of hard, fungible assets, whether military or economic, measured as quantitative and absolute categories. This had the advantage however of making power a relatively easy thing to assess and compare. However, one could say that even during the Cold War era, power could not be considered as an absolute as the two world superpowers did find it necessary to enter in competition and thus exercise their power to make sure one would not take the lead. Indeed, when considering the action of thinking and communicative units (States for example), power has to be thought of as a social phenomenon, as something that is exercised in some manner on someone. In the 1990’s, ideas, norms and any other socio-communicative categories were increasingly examined as potential sources of power. But it is really the events of 9/11 and its consequences that can be said to have crystallised in the public’s eye the detachment of the notion of power from its traditional material anchorage: the nation-state. Symbols, ideas, discourses were accepted as being, potentially at least, ‘powerful’.

Robert Cox argued that any discussion about power should start with the questions: a) where does power lie? and b) how is it exercised?² Now the European Union (EU) has entered the International Relations (IR) debate as a problematic entity. The EU is indeed an ‘enigmatic power’³ in terms of its institutional structure and its place on the world stage. The European Community was already identified in the 1970’s as a many sided phenomenon of a global scale (Galtung, 1972). But it is really in the 1990’s, when debates concerning relational and ideational power emerged, that the EU started to be looked at in a perplexed manner by IR students. What was this political entity that made itself heard increasingly loudly in the international arena? How could it be characterised and compared to the other traditional world powers and how could its influence, if it had any, be understood or theorised? The realist school did seem to be confronted to a problematic phenomenon. The liberal internationalists seemed to have found a perfect illustration for their case of multilateralism, cooperation, norms and socialisation. In 2002, Ian Manners seemed to have coined the EU’s nature in one phrase: ‘normative power’. However, our hypothesis here will be that the EU should be seen as a pluri-dimensional power that reflects in fact a pluri-dimensional world. We would like to make the case here for an inter-paradigmatic perspective on the EU’s nature and action. The EU can indeed be perceived at the same time as a structural, a realist and a normative power (amongst others surely but we will concentrate on these three aspects). This is particularly important to make sure that the EU, which is still in the process of defining its international identity, does not rest on any flattering self-identification that would endanger many of its insights on an international action suited to a ‘post-modern world’. In order to do this, we will take as a case-study the EU’s action in its neighbourhood (European Neighbourhood Policy) and more specifically its relations with its Mediterranean neighbours.

The European Neighbourhood Policy: an illustration of the pluri-dimensional nature of power

The EU simultaneously belongs to and works to create a dense network of relations with other states, groups of states, regions and institutions in the world. However, it can be said that since the mid-1990’s, its neighbourhood has taken a particular importance in the EU’s external relations. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is a fairly new policy instrument, elaborated in the early 2000’s by the Commission most notably, in order to rationalise the EU’s relations with its immediate entourage. Let us look at the different EU

documents that define this policy and the key words that can be extracted out of these texts. When examining the Commission's Communications from 2003 to 2007⁴, three notions seem to come back constantly despite the slight evolutions in the policy workings and set ups. First of all, the EU wants this policy to mainstream notions of '*interdependence*' (political and economic), '*cooperation*', '*partnership*' and '*mutualisation*' that would support the exportation and then the eventually the appropriation of ideas, norms and rules such as democracy, good governance and human rights. Secondly, the EU needs to work on the creation of what Romano Prodi, the then President of the Commission, coined as a '*circle of friends*' (2002) that would surround it. And thirdly, it has clear *interests* (the 2006 and 2007 Communications even mention '*vital interests*') in elaborating such a policy towards/with – the message is not always so clear – its neighbourhood and engaging in its *stabilisation* most notably for questions of transnational terrorism and migratory phenomena. Now, these three categories of objectives can in fact be linked to very different notions of power and ways of exercising it. This is interesting as it would confirm our hypothesis concerning the pluridimensionality of the European Union's international identity. But let us look into these three categories of powers in more detail.

The EU and ideas/norms/rules or the EU as a normative power

The Normative Power (NP) thesis coined by Ian Manners in 2002 was seen by him as a "*statement of what is good about the EU {...} made in order to stimulate and reflect on what the EU should be doing in world politics*"⁵. Clearly, this thesis was to be seen as relativising the importance of 'hard' power politics. Joseph Nye had introduced the concept of 'soft power' in the policy community a bit earlier and showed that there were instruments of power anchored in the an actor's ideological and cultural appeal to others. Of course, he was not the first one to conceptualise power based on attraction or 'soft'/unconscious coercion. Foucault, Gramsci and Bourdieu all had worked on such aspects of power. However, as J. Bially Mattern points out, it is Nye's account that really managed to capture the IR students' attention⁶. More generally, the discussion around the power of ideas, norms and institutions grew stronger with the development of the liberal-institutionalist school and its work on multilateralism, complex interdependence and socialisation of actors through institutions but also with the constructivist perspective on the importance of social interaction, perceptions

and conceptions of reality and culture as social constructs in the 1990's. Moreover, it is important to say that there is a clear ethical notch to these discussions as 'soft power' being based on attraction rather than coercion, it seemed as a superior method of political interaction.

The EU came in naturally as a particularly interesting case study for these stances. Just looking at the Commission's Communications on the European Neighbourhood Policy seems like reading an applied version of the liberal-institutionalist case. The focus seems to be put in partnership, dialogue, multilateralism and mutual learning: "*The neighbouring countries are the EU's essential partners: to increase our mutual production, economic growth and external trade, to create an enlarged area of political stability and functioning rule of law, and to foster the mutual exchange of human capital, ideas, knowledge and culture*"⁷. More generally, in the international sphere and when confronted to the other world powers, it is evident that the Europeans strive to defend preferences based on norms and law. Because of the particular institutional set up of the EU that delegates, for example, some bargaining powers in international commercial negotiations to the Commission, a supranational institution, and that has accepted the primacy to EU law, it will indeed have the tendency to be at the forefront of major 'normative' fights internationally. The EU has thus taken the world lead in combating environmental change. Ian Manners also shows empirically that the EU is a normative power through the policies it pursues. He thus shows for example that compared to other powers, and especially the USA which does use the normative rhetoric as well, the EU is in the lead in ratifying cosmopolitan international treaties⁸. Most importantly, the notion of normative power suggests an action that is transformative of its environment. I. Manners thus quotes E. Balibar when he says that the EU should be seen as a '*vanishing mediator*', it is to say "*a transitory institution, force, community...that creates the conditions for a new society by rearranging the elements inherited from the very institution that has to be overcome*"⁹. Thus, as Manners points out, if the normative power is successful in its action of promoting external points of international reference, then the expectation would be that the power, the EU in this case, should become less powerful, not more powerful. Thus the EU should be seen as a 'global civilising effort' (Julia Kristeva, 2000). Though it is clear that the EU can be legitimately be seen as an ideational power, the following considerations on different perspectives on EU power should lead to a non-absolute reading of EU's normative power.

The EU and its 'circle of friends' or the EU conceptualised as a structural power

The notion of 'circle of friends' is very interesting as it supposes a vision of the EU as some kind of central region that would be surrounded by a periphery composed of a myriad of different partner countries. This way of conceptualising in a very visual way the structural geography of the EU and its borders leads to a number of considerations that can be illustrated by the work of the Norwegian author Johan Galtung¹⁰. In his theorising of what he called 'structural imperialism', J. Galtung relied a lot on the previous work of the Dependency school. Our point will not be to review in depth the substance of his argument but his theoretical framework seems to be relevant to our search for different brands or perspectives on European power. In very simple terms, the permanence of the divide between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' in this world seems to be structured around relations between a Center and a Periphery. It is the established interaction between these two entities that is problematic as it ties the Periphery to a position of relative inequality and dependency. Of course, Galtung envisages an imperialistic intentionality in the Center but this is not so much what seems relevant to us today when considering the EU's action. What is interesting in our case is the more insidious effects such a conceptualisation of geographical space can have on the nature of the EU's power and its effects on the type of relations it establishes with its neighbours.

Structural approaches have limits of course. As Chris Brown points out in a review on Galtung's work: "*structure is a valuable explanatory notion when overall patterns of behaviour exist in apparent independence from the motivations and decision-making processes of the individual acting units. {...} {But this} tends to push aside the continual interplay of structure and action*"¹¹. Thus, structure tends to oversimplify things by omitting to include the problematic variable of contextualised agency. Moreover, it is clear that J. Galtung's work is heavily influenced by the bipolar context of the Cold War that made any structural theory quite enticing. However, despite the limitations of any structural explanation, they still seem relevant to any discussion of the nature of power. Indeed, it enables a critical perspective on the way a political entity shapes and interacts with its environment in ways that might be detrimental to some. The benefit of structural analyses is to provide an overall overview of the inner logic of certain types of relations and of the direct or indirect effects it can have on the perpetuation of inequality. In the EU's case and its relation with its neighbours, it is clear that, despite the mutualising rhetoric, the European Neighbourhood Policy is a strictly European policy tool (and its name confirms this). In saying that, one does

not necessarily think that the EU is engaging in some form or another of neo-imperialism but that it should beware of attempts of structuring its environment in a way that would tend towards a kind of Gramscian hegemony. Let us note that hegemony does not equate to dominance as historically, in order to become hegemonic, a political entity would have to create and then protect a world order which would be universal in its conception. In more explicit terms, this would mean that the hegemonic entity would not need to exploit directly other entities as the order created would be found compatible to their perceived interests¹². The hegemony would impose itself on the peripheral countries as a 'passive revolution': "*this effect comes when the impetus to change does not arise out of a vast local economic development...but is instead the reflection of international developments which transmit their ideological currents to the periphery*"¹³. The EU's policy makers should reflect on these issues. Indeed, it would enable them to respond more effectively to critics that denounce the EU's external actions as being Eurocentric. Other points might be of great value also. For example, the notion of fragmentation, presented by J. Galtung as a structural obstacle to the periphery's development should be reflected upon. Indeed, this would lead the EU to focus in a more substantive way in regional development strategy which would emphasize on the growing autonomy of the EU's partners. Though some effort is made in that direction with the recent development of the Black Sea Synergy or the Union for the Mediterranean, the ENP's energy focus is still very much based on bilateral agreements. It is important that the ENP does not become, as Z. Laïdi points out, an instrument of structuralising through norms the asymmetry between the EU and its partners, otherwise the Europeans risk to become the eternal norm makers¹⁴. But let us now look at a second perspective on the nature and influence of the EU's power.

The EU and its 'vital interests' or the EU as a rational/realist power

When the Commission states that it is in the EU's '*vital interest*' to have stable neighbours this seems to favour a realist stance on EU's external action. Let us take the example of the Euro-Med Partnership and more specifically the review of the EU-Morocco relationship during the last decade made by Cavatorta, F., Chari, R. S., Kritzing, S. and Gomez Arana, A.¹⁵. In their article, the authors point out that the EU has become a more proactive entity in the international sphere, conscious of its own security and economic interests, and equipping itself with a large range of foreign policy instruments, including a developing European



Security and Defence Policy. Basing themselves on Richard Youngs's work who argues that the EU can be considered as a rationalist actor pursuing interest-based objectives because it operates in a realist environment, they examine the outcome of the EU's action in the Mediterranean basin based on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and on the Barcelona Declaration. What they point out directly is that this partnership was conceived of straight away, and that on a quite open manner, as intrinsically related to the issue of security. However, in theory security was supposed to be achieved through democratisation, promotion of human rights and the rule of law. The general view on the process is that it has been a failure. Explanations of this failure have usually parted from a stance that accredited the EU with good faith when it displayed intentions of 'securitisation through democratisation'. Fault has been put on the individual Member States or the partner states that were said to have hijacked the process in one way or another. However, the authors consider another explanation: the EU had no interest at all in promoting democracy in the North-African authoritarian regimes as it knew perfectly well that the popular opposition to these regimes reflected itself in political Islam. Thus, when considering what real democratisation would mean – the election of Islamist parties – the EU preferred to secure stability through consolidation of such autocratic regimes and this despite their extremely poor human rights and governance records. Quoting F. Volpi, the authors thus show that in a realist framework: *“the assessment of the EU would be that stable regimes running their national economy efficiently in the Middle-East and North-Africa provide the best means of obtaining a well-policed zone of regional security and prosperity”*¹⁶. In this perspective, the case of the EU's relation with Morocco is extremely telling. The EU has been engaged in a partnership with Morocco for more than ten years now. However, the record shows that the political and social environment in the country have not evolved positively. All the power remain in the hands of the King, elections exclude the leading opposition movement – the Justice and Development Party – and international organisations report practices such as torture and ill-treatment. Despite all these facts, Morocco's regime continues to receive military hardware from EU Member States despite the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Export that requires governments to export only to states with solid democratic credentials and it is has been the leading recipient among the Mediterranean partners in terms of total funds received from the MEDA programme (1,180.5 million EUR in commitment appropriations between 1995-2003). Despite clear acknowledgement from EU officials of the corruption of the Moroccan government, no sanctions – economic or other – have been taken. Thus, it is relatively clear in this sense that stability and not democratisation was prioritised. In a realist perspective, this is

not a reprehensible strategy as the ‘moral’ of IR, if there is one, is definitely based on security in an overall perspective of survival. However, this is problematic when considering the very large emphasis based on normativity when studying the EU’s external action.

Conclusion: Power, Self-Representation and the Importance of Self-Reflexivity

This review of different perspectives on the EU’s power should not mean that the importance of norms, ideas and rules are to be ruled out when studying it. Indeed, the EU remains generally attached to the values of multilateralism, negotiation and is genuinely committed to be a transformative power that has a positive effect on its environment. However, Thomas Diez gives a very important insight when considering the EU’s normative power¹⁷. He thus points out that the representation of the EU as a normative power is in itself a strong vehicle of power. Indeed, the success of that image is in many ways a precondition for others to agree to the norms set out by the EU. The US has increasing difficulties in legitimising its international action because its image as a ‘normative power’ has been seriously challenged by its constant back-up by military means. In addition, this image of a ‘normative power Europe’ should also be understood in a dialectical process of ‘othering’. First of all, Thomas Diez warns against the temptation of modelling the ‘other’ whilst disregarding its own shortcoming. Indeed, the problem of the negative or relative construction of an identity usually means a risk of lacking self-reflexivity. Thus, whilst the evident particular nature of the EU’s external action should not be discarded and its transformative ambitions should generally be encouraged, EU policy makers should not rest upon a self-congratulating conception of the EU’s power. We have seen it, the EU’s influence is varied and pluri-dimensional, and the subtle inter-relation of norms and interests should always be reflected upon. It is thus important that *“the projection of European norms and values (in both policy and analysis) needs to be subjected to continuous deconstruction through the exposition of contradictions within this discourse and between this discourse and other practices. This would {...} rescue a normative power from becoming a self-righteous, messianic project that claims to know what Europe is and what others should be like”*¹⁸. The counter-example of the USA is quite illuminating here as its unreflective stance on what it considered its normativity led to a universalising logic that legitimised the heavy handed use of military force, though this is not to say that normative power is exclusive of military means. In that perspective it is important that the EU keeps aside any essentialised portrait of its identity and of its power. As Ian Manners points out, the self of the EU is fluid, complex,



relational and multiple. And this is exactly why, when considering the EU's power relations, one should envision, coming back on C. Enloe's comparison, a messy Jackson Pollock rather than a simple and transparent Superman encounter between two agents.

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¹ Enloe, C., 'Margins, silences and bottom rungs, how to overcome the underestimation of power in the study of IR', *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, ed. Smith, S., Booth, K., Zalewski, M., 1996, Cambridge University Press.

² Cox, R. W., *The Political Economy of a Plural World*, Routledge, 2002, p.78.

³ Laïdi, Z., *La norme sans la force*, Presses de Sciences-Po, 2nd Edition, Paris, 2008.

⁴ Communications from the Commission: COM(2003) 104 final, COM(2004) 373 final, COM(2006) 726 final, COM(2007) 774 final.

⁵ Manners, I., 'The European Union as a Normative Power: A Response to Thomas Diez', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2006, p.168.

⁶ Bially Mattern, J., 'Why soft power isn't so soft', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2005, p. 588.

⁷ Communication from the Commission COM(2003) 104.

⁸ Manners, I., 'The European Union as a Normative Power: A Response to Thomas Diez', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2006, p. 172-3.

⁹ Balibar, E. quoted by Manners, I., *Ibid*, p. 174.

¹⁰ Galtung, J., 'A Structural Theory of Imperialism', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1971, pp.81-117 and *The European Community: a Superpower in the Making*, 1973, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London.

¹¹ Brown, C. 'Galtung and the Marxists on Imperialism: Answers vs. Questions', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 10, No.3, pp. 222-3.

¹² Cox, R. W., 'Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* Vol. 12, No. 2, p.171.

¹³ Gramsci quoted by Cox, R. W. in *Ibid*, p.170.

¹⁴ Laïdi, Z., *La norme sans la force*, Presses de Sciences-Po, 2nd Edition, Paris, 2008, p. 178.

¹⁵ Cavatorta, F., Chari, R. S., Kritzinger, S. and Gomez Arana, A., 'EU External Policy-Making and the Case of Morocco: Realistically Dealing with Authoritarianism?', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 13: 357-76, 2008.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 363

¹⁷ Diez, T., 'Constructing the Self and Changing the Others : Reconsidering 'Normative Power Europe'', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2005, pp.613-36.

¹⁸ Diez, T., *Ibid*, p.636.

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Web links to Communications of the Commission

- Communication from the Commission COM(2003) 104 final: http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/com03_104_en.pdf
- Communication from the Commission COM(2004) 373 final: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52004DC0373:EN:HTML>
- Communication from the Commission COM(2006) 726 final: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2006/com2006_0726en01.pdf
- Communication from the Commission COM(2007) 774 final: http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/com07_774_en.pdf