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# EU normative power and regionalism: Ideational diffusion and its limits

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**Tobias Lenz**

## Abstract

The ideational impact captured by Manners's notion of normative power Europe (NPE) appears most distinct and potentially most consequential in the realm of regionalism. However, empirical research on the topic has been hampered by the focus on EU actorness and methodological difficulties. Drawing on diffusion theory, this article develops conceptual, theoretical and methodological foundations for conceiving NPE as ideational diffusion. It argues that Europe's ideational influence on regionalism can be fruitfully understood as the largely indirect process by which the EU experience travels to other regions through socialization and emulation. Yet, as structural conditions vary across regions, EU ideational diffusion rarely leads to similar or even comparable institutional practices and outcomes. A choice-orientated approach is proposed for examining these claims empirically, which focuses on specifying the underlying counterfactual: political decisions in regionalism would have been different in the absence of the EU. The article concludes by outlining the analytical and normative promise of the proposed recasting of Manners's original concept.

## Keywords

Diffusion, EU as a model, normative power, regionalism, regional economic integration

## Introduction

Regionalism may be a European invention, but it is not protected by copyright law!

Pascal Lamy (2001)

This catchy remark by former European Union (EU)<sup>1</sup> Trade Commissioner Pascal Lamy conveys a clear message: EU-type regionalism is freely available for all. Use it! And indeed, the ideational impact captured by Ian Manners's notion of normative

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power Europe (NPE) is both most distinct and potentially most consequential in the realm of regionalism. It is distinct because in contrast to most norms that Manners (2002: 242) lists as characterizing NPE, such as peace, liberty, human rights and the rule of law, the EU is the *only* global actor that actively and systematically promotes the norm and practice of regional integration around the world. This is where the EU's 'normative difference', as Manners calls it, has the most direct and distinct consequence for the EU's influence in international politics. It is potentially most consequential because a widespread 'wisdom' among scholars of regionalism holds that the EU sparked the two waves of regionalism in the era since the Second World War (see Breslin et al., 2002), the core of today's 'world of regions' (Katzenstein, 2005). Moreover, there is mounting evidence that region-wide norms, institutions and policies first developed in Europe are spreading (Alter, 2012; Jetschke, 2009; Lenz, 2012a). This goes hand in hand with a trend away from traditional models of intergovernmental cooperation and an embrace of supranational forms of governance among regional organizations (Marks et al., 2013).

Despite this distinctive and potentially widespread impact of EU normative power on regionalism, most research to date has focused not on this impact but on whether the EU *acts* as a normative power in terms of means, ends and discourses (for a summary, see Whitman, 2013; see also Diez, 2013). This is partly a result of Manners's own writings, which have concentrated on conceptualizing the relationship between the internal and external dimensions in understanding Europe as an international *actor*, and on elaborating the ontological and critical dimensions of normative power (Manners, 2006a, 2008, 2011). It is also a consequence of the methodological difficulties in uncovering the EU's ideational impact empirically. Whereas it is quite straightforward to develop a set of criteria for normative power and to test whether the EU conforms to them, it is more difficult to make causal inferences about the EU's ideational impact given the range of potentially confounding factors.

This article takes a step towards rectifying this imbalance. It recasts Manners's original formulation with a view towards facilitating empirical research on the EU's ideational impact on regionalism. Diffusion theory is drawn on to conceptualize normative power as the EU's ability to diffuse EU-type norms, institutions and practices by immaterial means – what is termed here 'ideational diffusion'. Manners himself (2002: 244–245) mentioned diffusion in his original article and has continued to argue that NPE '[requires] an understanding of social diffusion' (Diez and Manners, 2007: 179; see also Manners and Whitman, 2003). However, besides stipulating several diffusion mechanisms that bear little connection to the broader diffusion literature, he has not elaborated the idea more fully to date. Adopting this task, it is argued that Europe's ideational influence on regionalism can be fruitfully understood as the largely indirect process by which the EU experience travels to other regions through socialization and emulation. Nevertheless, as structural conditions vary across regions, EU ideational diffusion rarely leads to similar or even comparable institutional practices and outcomes. A choice-orientated approach is proposed for examining these claims empirically, which focuses on specifying the counterfactual on which they rest: political decisions in regionalism would have been different in the absence of the EU.

**Table 1.** Types of power and forms of diffusion.

	Diffusion mechanisms	Type of EU diffusion	Means/channels of diffusion
Military power	Coercion	Material, active	Military imposition, threats (negative conditionality)
Civilian power	Rewards	Material, active	Trade and cooperation agreements, technical and financial assistance (positive conditionality)
	Competition	Material, passive	Large, well-integrated domestic market
Normative power	Socialization	Ideational, active	Cooperation agreements, political dialogue, technical assistance
	Emulation	Ideational, passive	'Successful' integration; discourse/narrative, symbolic representations

The article proceeds in four sections. The next section locates Manners' concept in the body of literature on diffusion; the second details the ways in which EU ideational diffusion works; the third discusses its limits; and the fourth introduces the choice-oriented approach. The conclusion considers the potential analytical and normative advantages of the proposed conceptual recasting of NPE.

### Locating normative power in the world of diffusion

Broadly speaking, diffusion denotes the spread of norms, ideas, institutions, policies and practices in time and space. Diffusion theory advances the distinct causal claim that the decisions in one unit of analysis – be it bureaucratic organizations, states or regional organizations – systematically affect the decisions in other units through 'interdependent decision-making' (Simmons et al., 2006: 788, see also Gilardi, 2012). It operates through a range of mechanisms that capture theoretically distinct ways in which decision-making processes in different units become linked (Börzel and Risse, 2012; Simmons et al., 2006). It is argued that these map onto the classical triad of military, civilian and normative power that Manners uses to delineate his concept (Manners, 2002: 238–240; Manners and Whitman, 2003: 388–391). They vary by the type of diffusion – material or ideational, active or passive role for the EU<sup>2</sup> – and by its means. Table 1 summarizes how these three conceptions of power can be combined with prominent diffusion mechanisms, and applies them to the EU as the source of diffusion.

Actors employing military power spread their norms and practices by means of military imposition and other highly coercive material practices. Such coercion operates through the exploitation of material power asymmetries to impose self-interested political choices on weaker parties.<sup>3</sup> Even though Manners (2002: 240) initially defined military power strictly by an actor's 'ability to use military instruments', his subsequent writings suggest that he sees military power characterized more broadly by practices that reflect an 'aggressive' mindset rather than particular policy means per se (Manners,

2006a; Manners, 2008: 57–58). Thus, military imposition is as characteristic a means of influence as is the use or threat of economic sanctions. None of these plays an important role in the EU's promotion of regionalism. However, the EU has employed threats or negative conditionality in promoting regionalism, especially in Africa, that Manners would probably associate with military rather than civilian powers. During negotiations for Economic Partnership Agreements with African countries, for example, the EU threatened to withdraw favourable trade preferences if countries were unwilling to sign onto these agreements (Jones and Weinhard, forthcoming).

Actors employing civilian power spread their norms and practices exclusively through economic and other civilian means such as trade agreements and development aid (Duchêne, 1973). They exploit abundant economic resources to offer (positive) incentives. Again, even though Manners (2002: 240) initially defined civilian power by reference to civilian instruments, his subsequent writings, with their connotation of civilian as civilizing, suggest that using economic means in an overly coercive fashion falls outside this category (Manners, 2006a: 183–184, 2010). Thus, actors employing civilian power diffuse norms and practices through the promise of rewards (positive conditionality), that is by seducing others into desired behaviour.<sup>4</sup> In the EU's promotion of regionalism, these entail trade and cooperation agreements as well as technical and financial assistance. In relations with Central America and the Andean Community, for example, the EU has actively supported the creation of common markets and the strengthening of regional institutions along EU lines, while promising an inter-regional trade agreement with these organizations if they achieve a certain level of economic integration (Bustamante and Giacalone, 2009).

Civilian power also includes a form of passive international influence. A large and well-functioning internal market, which serves as the basis for economic power projection, generates material externalities that lead to interdependent decision-making through competition. Competition denotes a market mechanism by which other actors unilaterally adjust policies or institutions in order to enhance their competitive position in the world economy. The EU's 'power in trade' is well known to trade experts (Meunier and Nicolaïdis, 2006). The size of the EU's internal market often leads to the adjustment of economic policies in other countries or regions (Nicolaïdis and Egan, 2001; see also Damro, 2012). For example, many countries around the world reacted to the deepening of European integration with the Single Market programme in the late 1980s and early 1990s by engaging in or deepening economic integration among themselves (Oye, 1992).

Normative power denotes a form of influence by which norms and practices spread through immaterial or ideational means. Instead of EU-originated incentives changing other actors' utility calculations, as in material diffusion, ideational diffusion captures processes that emphasize changes in behaviour based on cognition and identity. The EU exerts influence 'by the impact it has on what is considered appropriate behaviour by other actors' (Diez and Manners, 2007: 175). Two mechanisms are particularly important.

The first is socialization, which denotes a process of discursive engagement in which an actor actively appeals to another actor's causal or normative understandings of the world to spread her/his norms and practices, entailing both 'positive' strategies of

persuasion and teaching as well as ‘negative’ ones such as naming and shaming (Checkel, 2005; Johnston, 2008: 24–26). The means by which the EU exerts influence through normative power are similar to those by which it exerts influence through civilian power. Socialization efforts take place through the institutional channels provided by cooperation agreements with regional organizations, especially in the form of political dialogues and technical assistance programmes. The subtle difference lies in the fact that these means indeed merely serve as *channels of diffusion* by providing settings for socialization to occur; they are not the *reason for diffusion* in that the prospect of obtaining material benefits from their provision is the reason for adopting EU-type norms and practices. Normative change in Mercosur’s approach to the integration of agricultural markets in the late 1990s provides an example. According to the coordinator of the working group on agriculture, EU experts she met during a study visit to Europe convinced her that an EU-type system of mutual recognition would be suitable for Mercosur and constituted a superior approach to eliminating non-tariff barriers to trade than the harmonization approach previously employed (Roxana Blasetti, July 2009, personal communication). This eventually resulted in the adoption of a Mercosur resolution on the recognition of equivalents in agricultural products (GMC 60/99).

The second is emulation, which denotes a process by which an actor learns from or copies a successful exemplar’s or cultural peer’s norms and practices (Checkel, 2001; Meyer and Rowan, 1977).<sup>5</sup> EU ideational diffusion, in this case, is the result ‘not [of] what it [the EU] does ... but [of] what it is’ (Manners, 2002: 252). In this depiction, the EU ultimately exerts international influence by virtue of its success and attractiveness, which is augmented through a specific discursive representation and symbolic practices (Diez and Manners, 2007: 183; Manners, 2006b). Consequently, the EU’s self-construction as a successful experiment in regional integration takes pride of place: narrative becomes a source of power, even if it is utopian (Nicolaidis and Howse, 2002; see also Manners and Whitman, 2003: 385). Mercosur’s endorsement of an EU-type common market model in 1991, literally copying EU terminology, is a good example of emulation (see Lenz, 2012b: 160–162). For many scholars, this was an ‘atypical and untimely initiative’ given the dominance of neo-liberal economic policies at the time as well as the uncertainty surrounding the cooperation process between Argentina and Brazil following the foreign debt crisis in the region (Botto, 2009: 175). However, emulating the EU’s market building process appeared an appealing choice in view of policy-makers’ ambition, analogous to that of Europe’s founding fathers, to embark upon a wider ‘community-building process’ given the involved countries’ historic rivalries (Menem, 1996). Moreover, it helped secure the survival of regional cooperation against US attempts to create a hemispheric trade area (Wrobel, 1998: 556).

In sum, Manners’s normative power concept can be read as ideational diffusion, which operates through socialization or emulation. Yet why would policy-makers elsewhere be persuaded by the EU to adopt or emulate EU-type norms and practices of regional integration in the absence of material incentives? In order to answer this question, a closer examination of the workings of EU ideational diffusion is necessary.

## **‘Shaping conceptions of normal’: the workings of EU ideational diffusion**

The central and most distinctive claim by Manners (2002: 239) is that normative power denotes the ‘ability to shape conceptions of normal’. Normality can be defined as the intersubjective recognition of certain norms and ideas as unquestioned, taken-for-granted ‘facts’. Therefore, changes in conceptions of normal – the emergence of a new normality, so to speak – entail a process of transformation in which one set of dominant norms is replaced by another through internalization (Checkel, 2005: 804; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 904). How does EU ideational diffusion through socialization and emulation facilitate a new normality in international politics?

In contrast to the direct and more immediate impact of materially based diffusion processes, ideational diffusion works in a largely indirect and often diffuse fashion. This means that outcomes are often removed from the direct impact of the EU as an actor or even an identifiable source of influence.

EU-type norms and practices of regionalism need carriers to travel to other locales. While these carriers might be EU actors, EU ideational diffusion often operates through local actors. The diffusion literature has amply documented the important role of local actors as entrepreneurs in the spread of new norms (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Grugel, 2007b). In the context of this article, relevant local actors include civil society actors, local epistemic actors from research institutions or government officials at various levels of the hierarchy. These diverse actors promote EU-type norms and practices for a variety of reasons: they offer superior technical solutions to cooperation problems; they are particularly appropriate or legitimate in a given context; or they serve to gain an edge over competitors in domestic bureaucratic or political struggles. Active promotion of EU-type norms and practices by local actors are thus often at the root of emulation at the central decision-making level – the mechanism that leads to ‘visible’ outcomes.

Effects of EU (ideational) diffusion that work via local actors on central decision-makers (usually ministers or Heads of State) might be termed higher-order effects.<sup>6</sup> These differ from the first-order effects that are due to the EU’s *direct* influence on decision-makers, be it through material means or socialization. The higher the order, the more indirect is the EU’s ideational impact. In second-order processes, the relationship between local actors and the EU is still rather direct: local actors explicitly draw on EU-type norms and practices in their entrepreneurial efforts and EU representatives directly support them, with the potential for direct socialization effects at this ‘lower’ level.

A good example of such a second-order effect is the interaction between national parliamentarians and the EU in the creation of a Mercosur parliament in 2006. Since the organization’s creation, national parliamentarians have struggled to obtain a stronger voice in regional affairs, encouraged by the EU’s own experience in parliamentarization (see Sanchez-Bajo, 1999: 335–336). Regular direct contact with members of the European Parliament buttressed these demands by local parliamentarians and rendered them more ambitious. According to some accounts, socialization processes played an important role in making local parliamentarians eventually push for the creation of a ‘proper’ regional parliament rather than contenting themselves with the limited competences they had been given in the form of the Joint Parliamentary Assembly (Dri, 2009:

64; Lenz, 2012a). At the same time, EU financial and technical support was crucial in elaborating an agenda and concrete institutional proposals for the creation of such a body, which were strongly inspired by EU institutional templates (many relevant documents are contained in Fundación Konrad Adenauer and Comisión Parlamentaria Conjunta del Mercosur, 2006). These served as the basis for the institutional design of the Mercosur Parliament, which policy-makers endorsed in December 2005 (Decision CMC 23/05). Thus, the creation of the Mercosur Parliament can certainly be interpreted as the emulation of Europe's early parliamentary body endowed with consultative powers only, including a strong element of EU ideational diffusion through socialization (Dri, 2009; see also Lazarou, 2012: 187). However, decision-makers would not have created the Parliament counterfactually, in the absence of local actors' activism.

In other cases, the EU's influence is less direct. In what we might term third-order effects, local actors loosely draw on EU-type norms and practices and advance them 'as their own', with no direct involvement by EU actors. An example might be the widespread endorsement of regional economic integration in many African and Latin American countries in the 1960s and 1970s. While Mattli (1999) has suggested that this phenomenon could be explained as a direct consequence of the EU's creation in 1957 (first-order effect), the externalities from European integration, never determined the *form* that integration would take. Countries could have reacted, for example, by seeking closer relations with the EU, either individually or jointly. Thus, local actors' framing of the problem and of potential solutions played a key role in understanding this outcome. Chief among these local 'framers' were regional epistemic communities attached to international organizations, which re-branded the EU's experience as a new development strategy for peripheral countries. The African Development Bank, for example, was important in convincing policy-makers that the creation of larger economic units through (EU-type) regional economic integration could help to overcome the structural impediments to development posed by the small size of many African countries' markets (Gregg, 1968: 326; see also Botto, 2009: 175–176). In these cases, local epistemic actors successfully appropriated the EU experience to advance it in a 'disguised' form with policy-makers.

Ultimately, EU-type norms and practices become normalized. At this point, they are delinked from their European origin and are viewed by local actors as generally applicable knowledge or unquestioned appropriate norms of behaviour. The abstract 'theorization' of the particular European experience – an activity that much social science research (as well as EU representatives) has systematically engaged in – has probably been conducive in this process (Strang and Meyer, 1993). Balassa (1961), for example, famously theorized European integration as a functional succession of stages from a free trade area via a customs union to a common market. Again, such normalization may lead to (the unknowing) emulation of EU-type ideas.

The endorsement of EU-type economic integration in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) nicely illustrates such a dynamic. In the early 2000s, policy-makers in the region engaged in a fundamental re-assessment of their organization (Isaksen, 2003). This process also led to a detailed roadmap on how to achieve the common market objective that had been codified in 1992. The so-called Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan, adopted in 2003, details the move from a free



trade area via a customs union towards a common market, a monetary union and finally the adoption of a common currency (SADC Summit, 2003). While European donor agencies largely funded the document's elaboration and European consultants were involved throughout the process, a close examination of key local actors' motives suggests an element of naturalization of the EU's experience (Lenz, 2012b: 163–164). In an interview, the head of the regional expert team that elaborated the plan mentioned that it employs the 'classical model of economic integration' (Angelo Mandlane, November 2009, personal communication). While he was aware of the parallels to European integration, he appeared to be genuinely convinced that this is the way regional economic integration is 'normally' done, without much attention to how appropriate it might be in the local context.

The multiplicity of such decentralized actions by local entrepreneurs of EU-type norms and practices, sometimes directly supported by the EU itself, may lead to the emergence of a new normality. Hence, Jupille et al. (2013: 2) argue that the widespread embrace of regional trade agreements reflects a new line in the script of modernity that 'is ritually embraced by states as a function of their need for legitimation' (see also Powers and Goertz, 2011). However, despite the potential power of these indirect ways through which EU ideational diffusion works and increasing evidence of its occurrence, the world is hardly littered with mini-EUs. In other words, there is variation in the practices and outcomes of (EU-type) regionalism. Why?

## **Limits to EU ideational diffusion**

EU ideational diffusion never enters into a vacuum. Instead, EU-type norms and practices meet pre-existing local conditions in other regions. Because structural conditions vary across regions, EU ideational diffusion rarely leads to similar or even comparable institutional practices and outcomes.

At the most basic level, these structural conditions are different material 'endowments', both physical and institutional. Various authors have argued that EU-type economic integration schemes, especially in the developing world, have been less successful than the EU owing to lesser economic complementarities and less favourable institutional arrangements to overcome collective action problems (see Mattli, 1999). Others point to limited domestic capacity – physical infrastructure as well as domestic institutions – as a key reason why EU-type economic arrangements often fail to be implemented (Draper, 2012; Gray, 2013). An example from the author's own research on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is that recent discussions on how to realize the commitment to an EU-type common market taken in the Bali Concord of 2003 included measures to both implement the free movement of goods, services, capital and skilled labour as well as adopt a common external tariff. While the former elements have all become subject to detailed action plans, policy-makers could not agree on the adoption of a common external tariff because countries with external tariffs that are already close to zero on most products, such as Singapore and Brunei Darussalam, rejected it (Lenz, 2012a).

However, an exclusive focus on these material structural conditions is not sufficient to understand why EU ideational diffusion seldom ushers in EU-type practices and

outcomes. Instead, deeply ingrained causal beliefs and local norms about legitimate behaviour also form an important limit to EU ideational diffusion. Such ideational structures not only condition the extent to which EU-type norms and practices are chosen in the first place (Duina, 2010); they also affect their operation once they have been adopted.

The most fundamental ideational structure limiting EU ideational diffusion in regionalism is policy-makers' attitudes towards sovereignty. Regionalism is centrally concerned with the shared exercise of sovereignty in order to reap the benefits of increased scale in governance in the community setting of geographically proximate states (see Hooghe and Marks, 2012). European policy-makers, largely because of the unique historical circumstances in which they found themselves after the Second World War, have been unusually willing to share sovereignty, through both the delegation of competences to supranational institutions, such as the European Court of Justice (ECJ) or the European Commission, and the pooling of decision-making power, that is deviation from the unanimity principle in taking collectively binding decisions. In other regions, governments are much less willing to share national sovereignty in order to reap the benefits of cooperation. In this context, the diffusion of EU-type norms and practices results in norm clashes (generally, see Cortell and Davis, 2005). Even though these norm clashes do not necessarily lead to outright rejection, they often change the nature of EU-type norms and associated practices.

This phenomenon has been theorized and described as decoupling, that is the delinking between imported norms and practices and their subsequent functioning in the new context (Meyer and Rowan, 1977: 357). Such delinking does occur in regionalism. Karen Alter's work on regional courts offers pertinent illustrations. In a recent contribution, she documents that 11 operational copies of the ECJ exist in the world today, especially prevalent among African regional organizations (Alter, 2012). However, despite emulating central institutional features of the ECJ model, policy-makers deliberately adjust its design to guard national sovereignty. They limit private access, render the preliminary rulings procedure less intrusive and/or make sanctions conditional upon unanimous agreement of members. As a result, the embedded law approach, which has made the ECJ so effective in enforcing Europe's legal rules, seldom ensues. Even very similar or identical institutional designs, such as that of the Andean Court of Justice, do not lead to similar legal practices in terms of litigation patterns and expansionist law-making by judges (see also Alter and Helfer, 2010). Local conditions, such as a lack of secondary legislation and of support by substate and societal interlocutors, are crucial in understanding differences in institutional practices and outcomes.

More recent research on norm diffusion has shown that hybrid processes of mixing rather than outright delinking are a frequent outcome of ideational diffusion. More often than not, external norms are adjusted to, merged with or reconstituted to fit with local ideas and conditions (Acharya, 2004). EU-type norms and practices undergo a transformation as they are 'appropriated' by local actors and start operating in a new context (see Grugel, 2007a). A good example is ASEAN. Especially with the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2007, there is little doubt that the organization has adopted certain EU-type institutional features such as a Committee of Representatives or the EU's economic integration model (Jetschke and Murray, 2012; Murray and Moxon-Browne, 2012). Nevertheless, there is little indication that

these EU-type institutions or rules will lead to EU-type practices. Local cognitive priors have already proven to strongly condition and ultimately alter their operation. For example, the implementation of trade liberalization commitments has been severely hampered by ASEAN's consensus-oriented 'meta-regime' (Aggarwal and Chow, 2010). As a result, one commentator argues, adopting some EU-type institutions with the Charter has 'simply strengthened ASEAN as a [pre-existing] norms-based organization rather than as a rules-based one' akin to the EU (Wong, 2012: 10).

In sum, reservations about sharing sovereignty in regional integration constitute a formidable obstacle to EU ideational diffusion, ushering in institutional practices and outcomes that tend to differ from those in the EU. Thus, they take us a long way in understanding why the EU still remains rather unique among regional organizations in world politics. Yet, despite structural limits and consequent variation in the degree of EU influence, the basic causal claim of this line of reasoning is unaltered: the EU matters in understanding regionalism. How can it be examined empirically?

### Uncovering EU ideational diffusion empirically: a choice-oriented approach

Causal claims about the impact of NPE – as any inference about the impact of power – rest on a counterfactual: policy-makers' decisions in regionalism would have been different in the absence of the EU. This counterfactual raises two related methodological problems in empirical research. First, how can we specify the hypothetical situation 'absence of the EU' (generally, see Fearon, 1991)? This question points to the problem of identifying plausible alternative decisions that policy-makers *could* have taken given their circumstances. Second, how do we attribute *actual* outcomes to EU ideational diffusion – a problem well known from Europeanization research (Haverland, 2007: 62)? In the context of this article, it is compounded by the fact that EU ideational diffusion tends to work in indirect ways, and can therefore be removed from the EU as a definable actor or even specifiable source of influence. How might we deal with these methodological challenges?

What is proposed is a qualitative, choice-oriented approach that rests on specifying the aforementioned counterfactual. It starts from the assumption that policy-makers involved in regional economic integration will invariably, sooner or later, encounter cooperation problems that are very similar to the ones that policy-makers in the EU have already addressed. Based on this assumption, the approach proceeds in three steps.<sup>7</sup> The first is to reconstruct policy-makers' decision tree at critical junctures, given a particular problem. The second is to assess correlation between with the EU-type choice and the *actual* outcome. To the extent that correlation can be established, the third is to 'verify' EU ideational diffusion through process-tracing and to eliminate alternative explanations. Each step is discussed below. The approach is summarized in Table 2.

The first step of the choice-oriented approach is to reconstruct policy-makers' decision tree by identifying the range of *potential* decisions that policy-makers *could* have taken. While many influential theories in comparative regionalism and political science more generally, such as functional and structural ones, 'explain' outcomes by identifying the constraints on policy-makers' choices, constructivist scholars, in particular, have

**Table 2.** Choice-oriented approach to examining EU ideational diffusion.

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Step 1: Reconstruct decision tree
Identify 'objective' contextual constraints
Identify potential alternative decisions (induction vs deduction)
Specify EU-type decision
Step 2: Conduct correlational analysis
Map EU-type decision onto actual outcome
If no correlation exists, EU diffusion is unlikely to have had an effect
Step 3: 'Verify' EU ideational diffusion
Control for alternative explanations (functional null hypothesis)
Trace process of EU ideational diffusion

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forcefully argued that such explanations are largely under-determining (see Blyth, 2003; but also Garrett, 1992). Constraints never determine outcomes; they leave 'wobble room', sometimes more and sometimes less. Thus, it is within these contextual constraints that political choice, and EU ideational diffusion for that matter, potentially matters.<sup>8</sup> Identifying this choice range and specifying the potential alternatives within it sets the stage for ideational (diffusion) arguments to develop theoretical and methodological traction. How might we do this?

One way is to identify potential alternative inductively, through the political debates preceding a decision. During discussions about changes to SADC integration in the early 1990s, for example, a Secretariat document noted: 'In the face of the region's realities, [...] the region must accept to transform itself into an economic block similar to the proposed North American free trade zone or the European Economic Community' (Southern African Development Community, Record of the Council of Ministers, 28 August 1991: 361). In this case, the stated political choice was between a NAFTA-type free trade area and an EU-type common market. Identifying alternatives from actual debates has the advantage of allowing actors themselves to define the 'size' of and alternatives within the choice range. However, it might be difficult to identify the *full* range of potential alternatives this way because actors have disincentives to reveal *all* discussed alternatives, especially when the final outcome does not reflect their main preference. Moreover, some might simply remain unconsidered because they are not perceived as options. This might be an indication of a taken-for-granted constraint, which could itself be the result of prior EU ideational diffusion (see Solingen, 2012: 633). In the above example, why do 'the region's realities' mean that forming an economic bloc was the only solution? SADC policy-makers could have sought to strengthen their economies, assuming that this was their ultimate goal, through individual domestic economic reform or by engaging important external trade partners individually.

*Deducing* potential decisions from theory rather than doing so inductively can address these difficulties. Theory – itself a product of previous 'experience' – often provides us with stylized alternatives given a particular problem. The level of abstraction at which alternatives are posited depends on the level of detail the researcher seeks to explain. It is important that they include only alternatives that are plausible in the case of interest. In this example, whereas unilateral, intraregional and extra-regional reactions might have constituted viable alternatives for policy-makers in southern

Africa in the early 1990s, simple muddling through – often another potential alternative in politics – was largely unrealistic. Some kind of economic reform appeared ‘inevitable’ in the wake of the foreign debt crisis that had badly affected many member states’ economies. Comparisons with other structurally similar cases are useful in positing plausible alternatives. Ideally, the deductively derived alternatives are also considered in actual political debates.

Positing a range of potential decisions in a deductive fashion as the basis for empirical analysis has been successfully employed as a research strategy to analyze the impact of norms and ideas on outcomes in the EU (McNamara, 1999; Parsons, 2003; Rittberger, 2005: 53–55). The author suggests that it can be used to analyze political decisions in regionalism elsewhere, with the added twist that the causally relevant norms and practices might not be regional innovations, as has often been the case in the EU, but diffuse from the EU itself. An EU-type norm or practice, however, needs to be clearly distinguishable from potential alternatives in a given situation. Thus, transparent indicators of both an EU-type decision and alternatives are important to guard against ‘pocketing’ any outcome in regionalism as being of the EU-type (a positive example is Alter, 2012: 138–139). Note that this specification may change over time, in line with changes in the EU itself as well as the emergence of new potential alternatives.

Having specified the choice range and clearly delineated an EU-type decision, the second step of the choice-oriented approach involves assessing correlation between the potential EU-type decision and the actual outcome. This is essentially a mapping exercise, gauging similarity between the EU and other regions – the core of any diffusion argument. If correlation exists, we have *prima facie* evidence of EU diffusion. If it does not, EU diffusion is unlikely to have mattered. However, correlation might be spurious, and it reveals nothing about the type of EU diffusion that might have been at play.

The third step of the choice-oriented approach, therefore, is to ‘verify’ the impact of EU ideational diffusion. This includes, on the one side, controlling for alternative explanations. Chief among them is a functional null hypothesis that explains the EU-type outcome in terms of *independent* adaptations to similar structural conditions (see Jetschke and Lenz, 2013). It responds to the most common source of inferential error in diffusion studies, known as Galton’s problem (Ross and Homer, 1976). Controlling for alternative explanations is also important because it allows us to assess the relative weight of EU diffusion as a causal factor. The more ‘obvious’ an EU-type decision, given contextual constraints – in other words, the narrower the potential choice range – the less important is EU ideational diffusion. When contextual constraints are largely pushing towards alternative decisions, EU diffusion matters more (see Mercosur example earlier).

On the other side, process tracing can provide positive evidence of EU diffusion, and allows us to distinguish between the material and ideational type. In the context of this article, it is particularly important to identify the channels through which EU norms and practices travel abroad. Causal inference about EU ideational diffusion, then, means evaluating the causal role of these channels in understanding outcomes and controlling for material EU diffusion. If few or no such channels can be discerned, higher-order effects might be at work. In this case, we need to go back in time to periods when EU

ideational diffusion becomes more explicit. In the SADC case, for example, contestation over an EU-type decision was more explicit, and therefore more easily discernable, in the early 1990s than in the early 2000s.

In sum, making causal inferences about EU ideational diffusion in regionalism centrally rests on specifying the counterfactual decisions taken in the absence of the EU (potential decisions) as convincingly as possible. This is therefore the central concern of the proposed choice-oriented approach. After this, the analysis proceeds in a conventional fashion: establishing correlation, testing alternative explanations and tracing the process of diffusion. Nevertheless, making convincing causal claims about EU ideational diffusion remains difficult. Therefore, the claims should be judged by their plausibility; establishing 'real' causality is largely out of reach.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to lay the conceptual, theoretical and methodological foundations for conceiving of Manners's NPE as ideational diffusion, thereby facilitating empirical research into the EU's ideational *impact* on regionalism. More specifically, it advances three core arguments. First, Europe's ideational influence on regionalism unfolds largely in indirect ways. The EU experience travels to other regions through socialization and emulation, with a crucial role for local entrepreneurs. Second, as structural conditions vary across regions, EU ideational diffusion rarely leads to similar or even comparable institutional practices and outcomes. Differing attitudes about sovereignty is the most important structural constraint on EU ideational diffusion. Third, causal inference about the role of EU ideational diffusion in explaining outcomes in regionalism hinges on convincingly specifying the underlying counterfactual, namely that political decisions would have been different in the absence of the EU. The proposed choice-oriented approach addresses this methodological challenge.

This concluding section briefly outlines the considerable analytical and normative promise associated with such a recasting of NPE. Manners's deliberate entangling of ontological, explanatory and normative elements has – rather unintentionally – reinforced an overwhelming focus on EU actorness in much empirical research (see also Diez, 2013). Employing the concept of diffusion to study the EU's international impact allows researchers to avoid several analytical and normative problems that accompany the often subtle yet pervasive EU centrism in much of the literature and rhetoric of political actors. To avoid misunderstanding, it is not proposed that there is something *inherently* more EU centric in the concept of normative power compared with potential alternatives. The present critique refers to the way in which it has been applied and used.

Analytically, Manners's original conceptualization of NPE has triggered a range of research that further develops and applies the notion of normative power as the ability to cause effects by ideational rather than material means (see Adler and Crawford, 2006; Lazarou, 2012; Whitman, 2011). Much of this research is based on a classical Dahlian understanding of power, presupposing an asymmetrical and direct relationship between the EU and other actors (see Dahl, 1957). Consequently, it tends to focus on the EU as the influence wielder and to portray the other side as a largely passive recipient of EU normative power. Two analytical disadvantages result. First, the conception tends to miss

the EU's more diffuse impact, including many higher-order effects. Second, research in this vein tends to attribute limited EU ideational influence to a lack of material power and, to a lesser extent, to intervening variables such as national institutions (Kelley, 2004: 453; Scheipers and Sicurelli, 2008: 619). These are important limits, but they are certainly not the only and not necessarily the most important ones.

Using the concept of diffusion shifts analytical attention from the EU to the receiving end of external influence. With its more network-oriented conceptualization of impact, diffusion facilitates inquiry into less hierarchical, indirect and more diffuse forms of influence (see Jetschke and Lenz, 2013: 628). At the same time, it puts centre stage those limits to the EU's international (ideational) impact located in local (immaterial) conditions, especially differing ideational structures.

Despite Manners' (2008: 46) explicitly critical impetus in coining the concept, its rather unreflexive usage by scholars and EU practitioners alike also raises questions from a normative vantage point. The main problem is that debates about the EU's external impact are – almost unavoidably – entangled with ontological questions about the nature of the EU as an international actor. This leads to a high degree of introspection (Bickerton, 2011). It becomes difficult to normatively evaluate the EU's international impact without suggesting, if only implicitly, that the EU is a 'force for good' in the world (see Diez, 2005). This EU-centrism even when considering the EU's *international* impact is normatively questionable on its own terms. However, in a world that is becoming increasingly multipolar with the rise of 'new' powers, it becomes highly unwarranted (see Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis, 2013; Mayer, 2008; Murray, 2010). While the EU is likely to continue to play an important role on the world stage for the foreseeable future, there is little doubt that it is becoming *relatively* less influential. Taking other actors, their interests, histories and cultures, seriously is therefore of central importance for the EU's international posture in coping with a changing world.

Diffusion as a purely analytical concept has advantages in this regard. It carries less of the 'ontological baggage' of normative power, thereby allowing researchers to assess independently the normative desirability of the EU's international impact (or the lack thereof) from ontological questions about the nature of the EU as an international actor. Moreover, it opens the conceptual possibility that the EU is not only a subject in international politics that affects others, but may also be an object that is open to external influences *from* others. Overall, systematically considering the receiving end of EU power projection through the tools offered by the body of literature on diffusion might be the most promising way to rescue Manners's critical impetus.

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## Notes

1. The term EU is used as convenient shorthand to refer to the current EU as well as its predecessors.
2. I use these terms in the same way as Börzel and Risse (2012) use direct and indirect EU influence.
3. Whether coercion is actually a diffusion mechanism depends on one's definition of diffusion. A narrow definition that excludes coercion has been argued for elsewhere, but it has been relaxed here for illustrative purposes (Jetschke and Lenz, 2013: 628; see also Gilardi, 2012: 454).
4. In concrete empirical instances, the line between rewards and coercion is sometimes difficult to draw. This is especially the case when the other side is highly dependent in EU rewards (Lenz, 2012b).
5. The body of literature on diffusion tends to distinguish between emulation, (social) learning, and mimicry based on the extent to which a cognitive assessment of other actors' norms and practices is involved (Börzel and Risse, 2012: 9–10; Johnston, 2008: 45–46; Meseguer, 2006). Given that the focus here is on the EU's passive immaterial influence in general, emulation is used as an overarching term for these concepts.
6. This term originates in statistics, in which it refers to adding higher-order terms to a regression variable in order to model a relationship between two variables more accurately.
7. The approach is presented as a logical sequence of steps, but in empirical analysis their order might be less stringent.
8. The possibility that EU (ideational) diffusion might alter the contextual constraints, especially over time, is not discussed here. Therefore, the presented approach is rather 'conservative' in its assessment.

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