

Fredrik Söderbaum and Alberta Sbragia (2010), "EU studies meets the New Regionalism: What can be gained from dialogue?" *Journal of European Integration*, Vol 32, No 6, pp. 563-682.

**EU studies and the 'new regionalism':  
What can be gained from dialogue?**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores what can be gained from increased dialogue between European Union (EU) studies and ‘new regionalism’ studies within International Relations (IR), focusing on two crucial analytical dimensions: the link between globalisation and regionalism, and the link between regionalism and the state. First, globalisation is a universal process, and it provides the context for regionalism across the globe, which enhances the potential for cross-fertilisation between EU studies and ‘new regionalism’ studies. Cross-regional comparison is, however, constrained by the fact that globalisation’s effects are unevenly spread around the globe. Second, comparing the EU with other forms of regionalism highlights the difficulty faced by scholars when moving across the divide separating advanced industrial states from developing countries/emerging economies. Strong state institutions and structures matter in the shaping of both national and regional governance; so does national wealth. Given the difficulties when trying to work across that divide, a focus on comparative regionalism should be viewed with both excitement and caution. The possibility for dialogue and cross-fertilisation depends therefore strongly on the compatibility of (meta-)theoretical perspectives and basic assumptions about states as well as regional institutions.

**KEY WORDS: European integration, regionalism, regional integration, regional cooperation, region, globalisation, comparison**

## 1. Introduction

European Union (EU) studies and New Regionalism (NR) studies within the field of International Relations (IR) have largely been separated from each other, which has resulted in a missed opportunity for theory development and cumulative research. Large parts of EU studies hold either the view that the EU is a more or less unique, *sui generis*, regional political community that has little in common with other regions (the so called N=1 argument), or the view that the EU should be compared to federal systems rather than other regions, relying on the tools from ‘comparative politics’ rather than IR.

Within mainstream IR literature on regional integration, the European case has been fundamental for theory-building, and the EC/EU has often served as the ‘model’ or comparator. In spite of this, there has not been much genuine cross-fertilisation between mainstream IR theory on regionalism and EU studies. As far as radical and critical new regionalism within IR is concerned, the majority of these scholars have often deliberately avoided the case of Europe, claiming that the conditions for regionalism outside Europe are fundamentally different, thereby reinforcing the notion that Europe is ‘different’ from the rest of the world.

During recent years an increasing number of scholars from both EU studies and from IR new regionalism studies have started to question the lack of dialogue and interaction. The purpose of this article is to explore and define where (and where not) the potential for cumulative research and productive dialogue between the different research traditions exist. In order to give as much justice as possible to both EU studies and the new regionalism within IR, the article consists of a collaboration between two authors from each ‘camp’. It should be noted that we do not claim, from the outset, that there necessarily should be an integrated research agenda between EU studies and ‘new regionalism’ studies, at least not in all respects. As this article will show, there are also some reasons why there has been a lack of dialogue.

Our analysis concentrates on two basic dimensions in the analysis of regionalism and regional integration. Whereas several other recent studies (including several in this special issue) focus on (conceptualisations and definitions of) regions and regional integration, we highlight on what can be referred to as the exogenous and the endogenous dimension of regionalism. According to Björn Hettne (2002), regionalism needs to be understood both from an exogenous perspective (according to which regionalisation and globalisation are intertwined articulations of global transformation) and from an endogenous perspective (according to which regional integration is shaped from within the region by

different forms of states and a large number of different actors). These two dimensions are crucial in any discussion about regionalism and regional integration. This particular focus also provide for a balanced discussion between the two academic traditions discussed in this article, since the exogenous dimension is particularly emphasised in IR studies, whereas the endogenous dimension features strongly in EU studies.

The article is structured as follows. The next section contains a brief overview of the two research traditions and also gives some reasons why there has not been a dialogue until now. The next two sections include our core arguments and concentrate, first, on the link between regionalism and globalisation and, second, on the link between regionalism and the state. A conclusion rounds out the article.

## **2. EU Studies and ‘New Regionalism’ Studies**

After World War II the study of regionalism, especially the early debate on regional integration, was dominated by an empirical focus on Europe. During the era of such early regionalism, European integration theories were developed for and from the European experience and then more or less re-applied or exported around the world. Although the neofunctionalists were somewhat conscious of their own Eurocentrism, in their comparative analyses they searched for those “background conditions” and “spill-over” effects that could be found in Europe (Hettne 2003; Haas 1961). All too often (but not always) the European Community was seen and advocated as *the* model, and other looser and informal modes of regionalism were, wherever they appeared, characterised as ‘weaker’ or ‘failed’ (i.e. with no ‘regional integration’ according to the dominating definition). Such a Eurocentric perspective still prevails in large parts of the discussion on comparative regionalism (even if it has increasingly been challenged hand in hand with the acknowledgement that regional integration may appear in many guises). Hence, regionalism in Europe is often, according to the Europe-centred view, considered multidimensional and highly institutionalised—both a descriptive and prescriptive contention—whereas regionalism/regional integration in the rest of the world is seen as only weakly institutionalised and reduced to either an economic or security-related phenomenon. In our view, there are some good reasons why these notions developed, but these types of generalisations tend to be problematic.

This characteristic of the field is confirmed by two renowned scholars of European integration, Alex Warleigh-Lack and Ben Rosamond (2010), who argue that in large parts of

recent EU studies scholars have considered the EU as a nascent, if unconventional, polity in its own right (“the famous N=1 problem”), exploring issues such as Europeanisation and the EU’s own political system. This perspective has generated useful insights, but as Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond assert, it has also carried a certain intellectual parochialism and thereby kept us from deepening our understanding of the EU as a political system. Further, it has ironically also reinforced the notion that the EU is *sui generis*, thereby down-playing the respects in which the EU resembles either federal nation-states or other regionalist projects around the world. Thus, recent work on the EU also includes explicit comparisons with federal systems in advanced industrial states, with the United States playing a prominent role in such comparisons (Fabbrini 2008; Bolleyer 2010; Kelemen 2006).

If the focus is changed from EU studies to IR theories of comparative regionalism in the current global context, there are essentially two contrasting attitudes towards European integration within this (heterogeneous) discourse. One strand of thinking tends to elevate European integration practice (and theory), while the other is considerably less convinced of the advantages of Eurocentric theories and generalisations. Neither of these attitudes is fruitful in the effort to develop the field of comparative regional integration. The first perspective—think for instance of realist or intergovernmental and liberal or institutionalist approaches—is dominated by a concern to explain deviations from the ‘standard’ European case. From this perspective, other modes of regionalism/regional integration are, where they appear, characterised as loose and informal (such as Asia) or as failed (such as Africa), reflecting “a teleological prejudice informed by the assumption that ‘progress’ in regional organisation is defined in terms of EU-style institutionalisation” (Breslin *et al* 2002: 11). In our view, many comparisons and generalisations, which depart from the European context and the European welfare state, are skewed through a lack of sensitivity to comparing regions which occupy unequal positions in the current world order and consisting of radically different state forms. A related problem with such Eurocentric bias lies in the ways the underlying assumptions and understandings about the nature of regionalism (which most often stem from a *particular* reading of European integration) condition perceptions about how regionalism in other parts of the world does (and should) look (i.e. heavy emphasis is placed on the economic and political trajectory of the EC/EU). Indeed, as Hurrell (2005: 39) asserts, “the study of comparative regionalism has been hindered by so-called theories of regionalism which turn out to be little more than the translation of a particular set of European experiences into a more abstract theoretical language”.

Whereas the mainstream IR literature on regionalism has favoured generalisations from the case of EU in their theory-building efforts, the tendency has been the reverse in large parts of the so-called ‘new regionalism’ literature in IR, especially the radical and post-modern variants. Many of these scholars have tried to avoid and challenge Eurocentrism, and numerous innovative and rather successful attempts to develop a regional approach specifically aimed at the developing world have evolved from this work (Axline 1994; Bach, 1999; Bøås et al 2005). On the one hand, there are good reasons for taking stock of this cumulative research on non-European regions and for being cautious regarding EU-style institutionalisation dominating in mainstream perspectives. On the other hand, however, large parts of this scholarship tend to mirror the Eurocentric view by taking the EU more or less as an ‘anti-model’ and by celebrating the differences in theory and practice between regionalism in Europe and in the developing world. Presumably because of the exaggeration of differences between old and new forms of regionalism, Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond (2010) argue that the critical regionalism scholars in IR have not engaged with EU studies scholars and thus they are actually upholding the N=1 problem. According to Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond, many of these IR scholars have even made a caricature of the EU and/or of orthodox integration theory (especially neofunctionalism, which is claimed to be misunderstood), which has resulted in a failure to learn from both its successes and its failures, giving rise to unnecessary fragmentation within the research field.

The meaning of ‘new regionalism’ is in need of clarification. The ‘new regionalism’ within IR may refer to a variety of approaches and theories (for an overview see Söderbaum & Shaw 2003). To some extent ‘new regionalism’ may include mainstream liberal or realist approaches to regionalism within IR, although the prefix ‘new’ is not used consistently in these discourses, implying that here it may be more appropriate to refer simply to regionalism (rather than new regionalism). In this context it needs saying that the new regionalism approach (NRA), which is a fairly widely referred analytical approach within the field of IR, is only *one* particular (critical-constructivist) approach amongst several other within the broader ‘new regionalism’ discourse.<sup>(1)</sup> This article will deal both with the new regionalism in the broader sense as well as give some attention to the NRA. Furthermore, given that there has been some debate (and confusion) regarding what is ‘old’ and ‘new’ in debate on regionalism in IR, it needs to be pointed out that there are certainly continuities between historical periods of regionalism as well as between earlier and more recent debates/theories (see Söderbaum & Shaw 2003; Hettne & Söderbaum 2008). According to Hettne (2005), one of the pioneers of the new regionalism, it is possible to move ‘beyond the new regionalism’; it

might even be time to bury the distinction. In this context it may also be mentioned that Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond's criticism, that 'new regionalism' scholars make a caricature of European integration theory and practice, may not necessarily be true in the case of the new regionalism approach (NRA). In fact, there is a considerable degree of debate regarding the role of 'Europe' within new regionalism, and some NRA scholars have even been criticised for Eurocentrism by some other new regionalism scholars (see Bøås et al 2005). Notwithstanding, Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond are correct in that many of the so-called new regionalism scholars in the critical and radical camp (in many ways including the NRA) have missed the opportunity to take advantage of the richness of the EU as a project, and in particular the impressive and diverse theory-building efforts within EU studies.

Few can dispute that the EU as a region is diverse (although the degree of diversity is not as great as some would claim if, for example, it were to be compared with ASEAN in Southeast Asia) and, as a result, there has been an explosion of interesting theorising on European integration. Hence, there is no single EU mode of governance but a series of different interpretations of the EU (see Wiener & Diez 2009), and, this diversity ought to have at least a potential positive influence on the (new) regionalism literature within IR. Again, Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond's (2010) injunction that scholars of regions other than the EU cannot afford to lock themselves away from the most advanced instance of regionalism in world politics (i.e. the EU) is important. But, as emphasised by Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond, there is a need for a framework that can address the complexity of regional organisations/regionalism, and at the same time transcend the case of Europe/EU itself. This is why there is such a good potential for bridging the gap between EU studies and IR new regionalism studies (also see Hettne & Söderbaum 2008; de Lombaerde et al 2010; Warleigh-Lack 2006; Warleigh 2004).

In other words, although it is crucial to move beyond the 'false universalism' inherent in a selective reading of regionalism in the North, and in the EU in particular, excluding the case of Europe altogether would be counterproductive. The stance taken in this article is consequently that the barrier for achieving a nuanced comparative analysis is not the European integration experience or theory *per se*, but rather the dominance of *certain* constructions and models of European integration. Indeed, to neglect Europe is to miss the opportunity to take advantage of the richness and diversity of the EU project and laboratory (Wiener & Diez 2009; Rosamond 2000).

This article is in itself an example of a dialogue between EU studies and IR new regionalism in order to discover what can be learned from a dialogue between the two

research traditions. While several other scholars (including articles in this special issue) debate the conceptualisation of regions/regional organisations and regional level processes, we highlight two analytical issues: the link between globalisation and regionalism, and the link between regionalism and the state.

### **3. The Exogenous Dimension: Regionalism and Globalisation**

This section raises the question of whether and to what extent the link between regionalism and globalisation is different within the EU compared to other regions. Much of the more contemporary debate on (new) regionalism within IR is strongly focused on conditions related to globalisation and world order (Katzenstein 2005; Hettne et al 1999-2001). This contrasts with many (but not all) earlier theories of regionalism as well as the early debate on European regional integration theory (neofunctionalism in particular), which were heavily concerned with the endogenous forces of regional integration (Hurrell 2005). Contemporary regionalism is thus strongly related to globalisation, and since the late 1990s the exogenous dimension has gradually received more attention within EU studies as well—leading to increased interaction between EU studies scholars and IR scholars (Hill & Smith 2005; Telò 2005; Laursen 2003; Robinson et al 2010)

Within EU studies many would argue that the EU is the agent of globalisation within its own borders as its very purpose at the economic level is to expand the European market. Others, however, argue that the EU is trying to ‘manage’ globalisation (a special issue of the *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 17, Issue 3, 2010, has just appeared on the EU and the “management of globalisation” within the EU) coming from outside the EU (through for example the WTO). Hence, the EU is a major actor in ‘globalising’ the EU itself, a major globalising force outside the EU, *and* a manager of globalisation.

Furthermore, the EU, through its trade policy in Southeast Asia, Latin America and Africa, has tried to promote both regionalism from outside and increased trade with the EU (Sbragia 2010). Some of that promotion was forced upon it by the WTO, a multilateral actor which can be viewed as both regulating and promoting globalisation. The strong EU-US trade and investment relationship and the increasingly important EU-China relationship indicates that Europe is both an object of globalisation and a key actor in promoting globalisation outside its border. The rise of emerging economies, especially visible as they fared much better in the 2008-2010 financial crisis than did either the US or the EU, raises the question of



whether both the EU and NAFTA will be viewed as objects of globalisation in the future to a much greater degree than they have been thus far.

The WTO is a key actor for the EU. In fact, the EU is an important actor in the multilateral system generally. It is not surprising that over 20 UN agencies have established offices in Brussels. Given the important role of the EU in providing development aid in the developing world, the EU is an important international actor (Carbone 2007). In this regard, indeed, it is an actor far more similar to the US than it is to the types of regionalism discussed by new regionalism scholars. The fact that the EU is an actor in other regions complicates straightforward comparisons. A key difference between the EU and its regional counterparts is that the latter are influenced by the former, while the EU is insulated from the influence of regions in the South. Again, the difference in power and wealth between the EU and regionalism in the South needs to be acknowledged by scholars of both comparative politics and IR.

The EU is a case of ‘closed regionalism’ in that it is a customs union, which unites many of the richest consumer markets in the world. Further, its internal agricultural policy plays a major role in shaping international agricultural trade. By contrast, Asian regionalism—such as the APEC forum—symbolizes ‘open regionalism’ which is characterised by unilateral activity, such as the unilateral lowering of tariffs and the unilateral liberalisation of national markets. According to new regionalism scholarship, regionalism is strongly related to globalisation, but there are many ways to describe the relationship and the role that states and regions play in this regard. Important sections of the mainstream (liberal and realist) IR literature tend to dichotomise globalisation and regionalism, whereby regionalism is seen as either a ‘stumbling block’ or a ‘stepping-stone’ towards the former (see Söderbaum & Shaw 2003). A considerable amount of literature has been produced on this dichotomy, which contains at least three major weaknesses. First, it is built on a particular ideological and theoretical position, which favours multilateralism at the expense of other notions about world order and the regulation of the global political economy (i.e. including regionalism). Second, it is built around a simplified dichotomy, which neglects the diversity of relationships between globalisation and regionalism. Thirdly, it neglects the complex linkages between regionalism and the rules of the multilateral system, for the multilateral system shapes economic regionalism, however imperfectly.

Resembling liberal scholarship, some critical scholars (in IR/IPE) state that current regionalism is above all to be understood as open regionalism, but consider it to be a problem rather than a virtue. For instance, a pair of the most eminent scholars in the field, Andrew

Gamble and Anthony Payne (1996: 251), claim that “one of the most striking characteristics common to all the regionalist projects is their commitment to open regionalism”, which tends to reinforce the detrimental effects of economic globalisation and global capitalism (i.e. the building block metaphor). Gamble and Payne believe that there is a long way to go before contemporary regionalism contributes to social regulation and social control, which in their view could be achieved by regulatory regionalism rather than neoliberal open regionalism (also see Gamble & Payne 2003). Their perspective, however, does not directly address the issue of how regulatory regionalism in the South could be structured so as to lift large numbers of people out of poverty. Further, it is unclear as to how regulatory regionalism would intersect with states with largely undeveloped welfare states.

It is the EU which has instituted a strong regional regulatory framework in the area of social regulation. Environmental policy is the key policy area within this policy arena. Now widely recognised as the global ‘leader’ of environmental protection, the EU has in fact intervened to counteract market forces. Given that the welfare state is very expensive and that the EU budget is tiny, the fact that the EU has nonetheless intervened in the market in the guise of a “regulatory state” is noteworthy (Majone 1994; Lodge 2008). The use of regulation rather than money as a means to balance economic liberalisation has provided the EU with a role which makes the argument that the EU is only interested in economic integration far more difficult to defend. Given the underpinnings required to impose effective regulation (including very considerable administrative capacity), however, it is unclear how such a regulatory approach could be adopted in the South.

When it comes to globalisation outside of the EU, in fact, the outlook is more mixed. One collection featuring some of the most prominent IR regionalism scholars, *Theories of New Regionalism* (Söderbaum & Shaw 2003), shows that any simple relationship between globalisation/multilateralism and regionalism needs to be challenged. In fact, more or less all theorists in the aforementioned edited collection (albeit some more than others) state that globalisation and regionalisation produce their own ‘counterforces’ with mixed outcomes in different regions. In addition, the infamous dichotomy is reductionist in its content since both ‘economic globalists’ as well as proponents of regions as ‘stepping stones’ neglect the turbulence and contradictions inherent in the globalisation/regionalisation dyad. One group of authors in the aforementioned volume, Bøås, Marchand and Shaw (2003), claim that we are dealing with different layers and overlapping processes and nexuses of globalisation and regionalisation simultaneously, what these authors refer to as the ‘weave-world’. Another contributor, Bob Jessop (2003), highlights a large number of micro-regional

and rescaling activities that lead to new cross-border micro-regions—all of which are closely related and occurring within contexts of both globalisation and macro/meso-regionalisation.

Furthermore, Helge Hveem (2003), draws particular attention to regional projects and the alternative ways whereby these can ride on, reinforce, reject, hinder or hedge globalisation. In a somewhat similar fashion, but referring specifically to multilateralism, Diana Tussie (2003) also argues for a more subtle understanding:

regionalism thrives in the policy spaces left by multilateralism but that at the same time when these lacunae are too many or too wide these tensions are then re-played in the multilateral sphere. In this sense the focus on these neglected games allows us to move away from one-dimensional views that posit regionalism and multilateralism as dilemmas of building blocks versus stumbling blocks (Tussie 2003: 100).

There are several possible perspectives on the relationship between regionalism and globalisation within the new regionalism. The NRA emphasises that regionalism must be placed within its particular historical world order context. Whereas the old regionalism in the 1950s and 1960s was dominated by the bipolar Cold War structure with nation-states as the uncontested primary actors, current regionalism since the end of the 1980s needs to be related to the current transformation of the world, especially globalisation. The Gothenburg camp of NRA prefers the dialectical approach associated with Karl Polanyi, whereby globalisation can be tamed through “politicising the global” and “the return of the political” in the overall context of globalisation (Hettne 2003; Hettne and Söderbaum 2008; also see Cooper et al 2008). In the theory of economic history associated with Karl Polanyi, an expansion and deepening of the market is supposedly followed by a political intervention “in defence of society”; the expansion of market exchange constituting the *first*, and the societal response the *second* movement, together making “the double movement” (Hettne 2003). This represents a dialectic understanding of regionalism and globalisation, emphasising contradiction and change. Regionalism is thus part of both the first and second movement, with a neoliberal face in the first (i.e. ‘open regionalism’), and a more interventionist orientation in the second (e.g. protectionist, fortress or developmental regionalism). There is thus a transnational struggle over the political content of regionalism/regionalisation, as well as over that of globalisation. It is important to note that both the first and the second movements, albeit through different dynamics, are engineered by political forces and actors (and therefore including state as well as non-state actors). The first sequence of the double movement

implies a deliberate institutionalisation of market exchange and the destruction of institutions built for social protection, a destruction euphemistically called ‘deregulation’ or even ‘liberalisation’ in line with the ideology of globalism. According to Polanyi, the resulting turbulence and social unrest leads to attempts at re-regulation, new institutions of social welfare adapted to the new political economy created through this transformation. In the historical transformation analysed by Polanyi, these institutions were an integral part of the modern nation-state.

This does not mean that globalisation is uniformly ‘economic’ and regionalisation ‘political’. In both processes political decisions shaped by contesting social and political forces are crucial, and the consequences in terms of distribution of resources are deeply political. As stressed above, the distinction between economic and political must not be exaggerated. Here ‘political’ will normally refer to efforts at creating political communities on various levels of the world system; but de-politicisation or deregulation is nevertheless also political in its redistributive consequences.

‘The second great transformation’ takes place in a global context, with different manifestations in different parts of the world. Some of these manifestations are local protests, many of which are not very dissimilar from the countermovements in the original transformation. To be counted as part of a ‘second’ transformation the countermovements should, however, address global issues, even in their local manifestations. This means that they search for a global agenda, realising that local power-holders do not exercise full control and that challenges as well as counterforces express relations between different societal levels. “Resistance is localized, regionalized, and globalized at the same time that economic globalization slices across geopolitical borders” (Mittelman 2000: 177). We should not expect a uniform response to this ‘great transformation’, but, as history shows, many forms of resistance, constructive as well as destructive (Gills 2000). And regionalism is only one of them.

One of the issues which is often overlooked in macro-discussions of regionalism has to do with the political regimes of states incorporated into regional groups. Such groups often incorporate states with non-pluralistic/non-democratic political systems. A cursory examination of ASEAN, for example, highlights the dilemma of how a region would incorporate the types of countermovements implicitly assumed in discussions of regulatory regionalism. Given that arguably only Indonesia has moved to a fully democratic system (and that only very recently), the kinds of political structures and opportunities for mobilisation which the idea of regulatory regionalism incorporates seem quite alien to the political

opportunity structures found within ASEAN members. Authoritarianism is alive and well in ASEAN states so that assumptions about resistance need to be carefully specified vis-a-vis specific states and regions.

#### **4. The Endogenous Dimension: Regionalism, the State and the New Regionalism**

##### **Approach**

Comparing the EU involves a number of issues when it comes to case selection. The fact that the EU, viewed within a comparative perspective, is made up of well institutionalised democratic states characterised by the rule of law, effective public administrations, sophisticated systems of public finance, very high per capita GDP, and low rates of corruption is striking. Nowhere else in the world do a group of neighbouring states exhibit those characteristics. That helps account for the fact that comparative work on the EU tends to focus on federal systems such as the US, Canada, and Switzerland (Fabbrini 2008; Bolleyer 2010; Kelemen 2006). Many within EU studies would argue that the EU resembles such advanced industrial states rather more than it resembles other forms of regionalism. It has seemed more ‘natural’ to many EU scholars seeking comparisons to focus either on their own federal states and traditions (for scholars in e.g. Germany), or to look across the Atlantic to other quasi-continental polities with evolving federal structures.

One exception might be similarities between the EU and NAFTA. Although those two forms of regionalism differ in significant ways, they also have similarities which are not found in other regional projects such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Mercosur, or ASEAN. Although NAFTA does not have institutions à la EU, the highly detailed trade agreement which ‘governs’ that regional body does in fact resemble the EU in its emphasis on market integration based on highly formal and legally enforceable rules. The EU defines market integration more expansively—incorporating for example environmental protection—than does NAFTA and is not restricted to market integration, but other forms of regionalism do not possess the legally binding nature of regional rules which characterise both the EU and NAFTA. It is not an accident that the EU’s and NAFTA’s member states are highly institutionalised states with extremely powerful legal and judicial systems when compared with states in the developing world. (Mexico does not fit this description, but NAFTA’s ‘DNA’ was set by the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, and the US was the dominant negotiator in establishing NAFTA’s rules).

Regional integration theory, rooted as it has been in the discipline of International Relations, has tended to ignore the characteristics of the states involved in the regional project. Neofunctionalism, with its focus on economic interests, implicitly or explicitly assumed that increasing the level of trade among states involved in a regional project was both possible and likely. Yet, in the developing world, the US and the EU, rather than less developed countries' own neighbours, are the major export markets. Brazil, for example, trades far more with those two than it does with its neighbours in Mercosur. China's top two trading partners are the US and the EU with its neighbours in East and Southeast Asia less important than those two. ASEAN members trade more with China than with each other. Furthermore, regionalisation in Asia has until very recently been driven by supply chains shaped by the needs of Japanese industry. The position of emerging economies within the international trading system is quite different from the US and EU's (and to an increasing extent China's) position within that same system.

As indicated above, the NRA, at least in its Gothenburg variant, normatively argues for a "return of the political" with regionalism viewed as providing an interventionist impulse at a certain phase of globalisation. Yet is unclear how such an intervention is actually formulated and implemented. One possibility is that regional projects such as Mercosur and ASEAN are being used to protect the interests of regional members (or at least the interests of the most powerful regional members) *vis-à-vis* their more powerful regional neighbours. Brazil's use of Mercosur to kill the US-proposed Free Trade of the Americas (FTAA) and ASEAN's acceptance of greater economic integration in order to strengthen itself *vis-a-vis* China might be an example of this dynamic. However, such a dynamic would involve the strengthening of regional geo-economic power in the face of stronger neighbours, rather than increasing social protection within regional member states in the Polanyi mode.

The NRA's topics illuminate assumptions which underlie European integration and which are taken for granted by EU studies scholars. The latter assume the existence of powerful transnational corporations owned by European shareholders, well institutionalized civil society (at the national if not the EU level), a well-developed legal structure founded on the centrality of the rule of law, comparatively impressive levels of administrative capacity, and above all a great deal of wealth in both the public and private sectors. By contrast, the NRA focuses often on weakly institutionalised societies without major domestic multinational corporations (key actors in both NAFTA and the EU) and on civil society actors which are often funded externally by either the EU, US, or UN). Further, the lack of strong state institutions leaves a great deal of room for patron-client relationships, corruption and informal

politics. It is certainly true that some of the EU-15 and perhaps many of the EU-27 member states also are characterised by such features, but in comparative perspective, those features are far less dominant within the EU member states than they are in the areas most analysed by the new regionalism scholars.

The role of cross-border or sub-national regions in the new regionalism contrasts with those in the EU. Given the nature of the states involved in the EU, a sharp distinction is made between the ‘region’ of the EU and the subnational regions of say Spain or Germany. Subnational entities in well institutionalised democratic states, by definition, are not equivalent to the national government. Even in Belgium, the regional communities have been forced to work out arrangements permitting Belgium to have a (more or less) unitary voice. When Belgium is invited to an international meeting, only one person represents Belgium.

The international system is an important element in structuring national-subnational relations within advanced industrial states. Informal regionalism (which is an important focus in the NRA) can be important economically, but politically it cannot be easily institutionalised as such institutionalisation would crash into the firm structures of the state. It is important to not underestimate the capabilities of the European state. Within the EU, the Schengen border replicates the strength that national borders once enjoyed. ‘Strong’ borders have not disappeared in Europe—they have simply moved eastward. Cross-border subnational regionalism thus is dependent on the relations between the states involved. A region which cuts across EU members is going to have a different experience from one which cuts across a major border. Thus, a region which cuts across Poland and Ukraine will face a different set of political challenges than one which fits within the boundaries of the EU.

Regional informality, however, is difficult to find in the OECD world given the array of regulations, public agencies, and political actors which are involved in the shaping of economic activity. There may not be a single political or executive authority, but the economic relationship itself will need to be created by respecting a wide range of differing laws. Civil society groups themselves will be facing a different set of powers, incentives, and constraints. Hence, even contentious politics in Europe is still primarily nationally bound.

Subnational governments in at least the EU-15 are strong actors and in fact at the EU level have their own EU institution, the Committee of the Regions. It is not viewed as terribly important within EU studies because, as a consultative body, it does not have the power to make policy. Within EU studies, therefore, the lack of policymaking power in any institution immediately relegates it to a third-tier status. Its very existence, however, does help define what a ‘region’ is within the EU—i.e. it is an intra-state rather than cross-border

enterprise. That does not negate the existence of cross-border regions, but it does mean one has to be very careful in how the term 'region' is used. Thus, the term 'region' often implies a territorial entity, which is represented within the Committee of the Regions.

What this argument is leading to is that the NRA may be best suited for comparative work in regions in which states are weak, state controls and institutions are not major actors in either regulating economic activity or in dealing with corruption, and the public administration is not a major actor in either regulating economic behaviour or enforcing legal constraints.

An EU studies perspective posits that 'Europe' is different from the developing world but similar to non-European members of the OECD world (for want of a better term). That would help explain why comparative work which compares the EU with national systems focuses on OECD states rather than, for example, including India in the sample. The institutionalised state is important in the OECD world, for subnational regions within a single state, for cross-border subnational regions, and for governance at the supranational regional level. Hence, asking NRA questions does not come naturally to EU studies because institutionalised governments are so strong at all levels of the system. The NRA perspective is so different from EU Studies that it is not easy to link the two. Because the EU requires the pooling of sovereignty among very powerful, old, and heavily institutionalised states, the EU itself has had to be heavily institutionalised and powerful. Within such a framework, 'informal' (economic) processes are actually often operating within very clearly delineated boundaries within which most (legal) actors are constrained to at least some extent. The institutionalised state perspective dominates.

In this context it must be clarified that the NRA asks different questions compared with much of mainstream regional theory within IR (realist and liberal approaches) and most of EU studies. In contrast to most other theories of regionalism, the NRA transcends the focus on inter-state regional frameworks, and its main focus is not regional institutional design or regional organisations, but how regions are created through the process of regionalisation. Instead of departing from one particular pre-defined and fixed regional delimitation (normally a regional organisation), the NRA seeks to understand how regions are made and unmade, and by whom and for what purpose. The approach emphasises the constructed nature of regions, in particular critically interrogating how and why state and non-state actors come together in the interplay between formal and informal regionalisation in the context of globalisation. This usually implies the possibility of many processes of regionalisation, which may or may not converge into higher levels of regionness (Hettne & Söderbaum 2000). As a result there has



been a more intense focus on soft, informal regionalism, as well as an intensified debate regarding the various ways in which state, market, and civil society actors relate and come together in different ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ patterns of regionalisation.

The NRA approach has been able to highlight a divergence of regional tendencies ‘on the ground’ in different parts of the world and in so doing it has offered an alternative understanding to regional dynamics more broadly than the mainstream EU integration approach allows for. Whereas the mainstream European-induced approach to regional integration would, for instance, emphasise the ‘failure’ of formal regionalism in Africa (and to a large extent even in East Asia), an NRA analysis, adopting a critical-constructivist perspective shows that many regional processes take place outside of the scope of, or in reaction to, formal regionalism. Indeed, the tendencies highlighted by the NRA appear to offer valuable insights and venues for comparison across different regions—to some extent including Europe.

Although an analysis of informal regionalism is not totally absent in EU studies, the intense link between formal and informal regionalism/regionalisation can be seen as a contribution of the NRA to European and comparative integration studies. The African case has been widely researched by NRA scholars, and these studies show that one can, for instance, speak of relevant and truly regional dynamics and patterns that are not *per se* mirrored by formal regional efforts (Grant & Söderbaum 2003). The African case furthermore highlights that it is important not only to inquire into the informality underpinning/accompanying formal regional projects, but also to take a broader perspective on formal-informal aspects of regionalism/regionalisation. It should not be ruled out that this is of relevance also in the study of European integration. The example of regional civil society organisations opposed to or in support of (and perhaps co-opted by) existing configurations of regional integration in Africa extends an appealing invitation to investigate the role civil society play in influencing regional dynamics elsewhere. The different civil society lobby-groups surrounding European decision-making constitute just one case in point amongst many other possible avenues of fruitful comparison across regional divides.

The NRA approach and conceptualisation is not equivalent to rejecting the state. Clearly, NRA scholars are sometimes wrongly accused of ignoring state actors, as if non-state actors dominate the ‘new regionalism’. Indeed, it is important to continue to study ‘states’ and ‘countries’, however defined. The important assumption in the NRA is that the state is not taken for granted; it is problematised and unpacked, hence questioning the conventional ‘national interest’. As a consequence, the NRA considers both state and non-state actors, and

focuses on both formal and informal processes of regionalisation. Rather than separating actors into perceived ‘autonomous’ groups or spheres of actors, the framework suggests that actors will be grouped in formal or informal multi-actor networks, partnerships and modes of governance (Söderbaum 2004b). Indeed, there is, from the NRA perspective, a need to problematise the division of actors into homogenous categories and embrace a theoretical perspective that allows for the possibility that each category (such as states, markets, civil societies) contains an internal series of paradoxes and conflicts confined to different spatialities. As noted above, it is possible that this perspective has the largest relevance in the post-colonial world, where the institutionalised state is not as strong as in the OECD, and where the state-society complex tends to have a different shape. Yet, the role of transnational actors is widely discussed in European Union studies. A new volume on *Civil Society and International Governance: The Role of Non-state Actors in Global and Regional Regulatory Frameworks* (Armstrong et al 2011) shows the relevance of such inquiry and comparisons between Europe and other regions (also see Warleigh 2001).

Many scholars (especially in the liberal and institutionalist tradition) tend to be rather idealistic about state-led regional cooperation and regional integration, as if regionalism and regional organisations are inherently good. In *The Political Economy of Regionalism. The Case of Southern Africa*, Söderbaum (2004a) tries to ‘unpack’ the homogenous nation-state and state-society complex, and address for whom and for what purpose regionalisation is being pursued (i.e. why, how and by whom regions are constructed and deconstructed). The case study reveals how ruling political leaders engage in a rather intense diplomatic game, whereby they praise regionalism and sign treaties, such as free trade agreements and water protocols. By so doing, they can be perceived as promoters of the goals and values of regionalism, which enables them to raise the profile and status of their authoritarian regimes (i.e. what is labelled “regime-boosting” or “sovereignty-boosting”). This social practice is then repeated and institutionalised at a large number of ministerial and summit meetings, which in reality involves no real debate and no wider consultation within member states (Simon 2003: 6). For the political leaders, it is a matter of constructing an image of state-building and the promotion of important values. Some analysts would perhaps try to portray these activities as a means to promote the ‘national interests’ of the ‘states’. However, the type of regionalism designed to enhance the reproduction-legitimisation of the state is exclusivist and centralised, “reflecting the perceptions of government leaders, small groups of civil servants and perhaps also key bilateral and multilateral donors”, and its positive effects on human security or human development is very uncertain (Simon 2003: 6). In fact, it is

most uncertain whether it has much positive effect on the so-called broader ‘national interest’, beyond those people associated with or depending on the political ‘regime’.

“Regime-boosting regionalism” in Africa is often tied, on the one hand, to the supposedly specific characteristics of the African state-society complex, while on the other, to Africa’s particular insertion in the global order. This may suggest that this type of analysis is most relevant in the post-colonial world. Yet there are strong reasons to explore when it is that regionalism is deepened, in order to strengthen regime interests as well as what can be labelled ‘symbolic’, or discursive, regionalism. An NRA-induced analysis of regionalism in Africa suggests the universal importance of strategic norms, procedures, symbols, as well as ‘summitry regionalism’. Indeed, other similar discursive practices of regionalism in Asia, Europe, as well as North and Latin America suggest a large potential for intriguing comparison. For example, there seems to be a strong sense of ‘regime-boosting’ within ASEAN (backed by the tradition/norm of non-intervention), as well as in the contemporary symbolic regionalism in South America led by Hugo Chavez. It also appears that the symbolism (even ‘circus’) surrounding the EU Presidency and the European Council summits may eventually be analysed as an instance of the reproduction-legitimation of the states. The position is quite interesting as some states have used Europe to legitimate their regimes (mirroring the African pattern) whereas others have used Euroscepticism for similar aims. In short, this may be a phenomenon of democracies or it may be one of a well-developed region, but regardless it may give an interesting basis for comparison between Europe, African, Asian as well as other regions.

In this context it must be underlined that, in recent years, social constructivism has also gained a more prominent place in the study of European integration (Christiansen *et al* 2001). This line of thinking has entered the discussion on European integration mainly as a spillover from the discipline of IR (just like the NRA), and as a means of transcending the rather introverted debates between the conventional and rationalist theories of European integration referred to previously. The social constructivist approach in the European integration debate emphasises the mutual constitutiveness of structure and agency, and pays particular attention to the role of ideas, values, norms and identities in the social construction of Europe, which in turn draws attention away from the formality and particularities of the EU towards norm diffusion and identity construction (Christiansen *et al* 2001). At least to some extent it focuses on Europe rather than the EU in itself, which is similar to the NRA. Furthermore, and most importantly, as Checkel points out, the differences between Europe and the rest of the world are overstated—but the degree of overstatement is in dispute.

According to Checkel, ‘If not yet completely gone, then the days of *sui generis* arguments about Europe are numbered, which is very good news indeed’ (Checkel 2007: 243). The above suggests a considerable degree of compatibility between the European constructivists and the NRA, which reveals a potential for cross-fertilisation between certain strands of EU studies with certain strands of new regionalism studies within IR. Nonetheless, the degree of cross-fertilisation which may be possible is still an open question—one which will be answered only by serious research on the part of scholars both knowledgeable about various parts of the world and willing to work together to delineate the lines of convergence and divergence.

## **Conclusion**

This article represents a serious attempt to engage in a dialogue between an EU studies specialist and an IR new regionalist scholar on the role of the EU in comparative regionalism. We took our point of departure in our two different academic traditions in order to pinpoint the basic differences between us.

It bears mentioning that during the era of classical regional integration, the distinction between EU studies and IR did not exist. Although we are not at all advocating a merger of the two fields of study, we do believe that there are important benefits from increased dialogue and interaction. It is obvious that the EU studies is a very dynamic field of research, where new theories are developed, tested and debated, both between and within disciplines. We agree with Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond (2010: 993) that “A careful treatment of the accumulated insights from EU studies (including a proper re-inspection of classical integration theory) brings clear methodological and meta-theoretical benefits for the project of comparative regional integration scholarship”. We believe also that EU studies would benefit both conceptually and empirically from increased comparison with other regions (i.e. an escape from the ‘N=1’ problem), although this requires carefulness about what can and what cannot be compared. Another potential benefit for EU studies would be if critical theory perspectives were allowed to contribute to theoretical development and debate in a similar fashion as it has done within IR as a discipline.

More specifically, our analysis has concentrated on two of the most important parameters in the study of regionalism and regional integration, first, the link between regionalism and globalisation and, second, the relationship between regionalism and the state.

The relationship between globalisation and regionalism was one of the core elements of the development of so called new regionalism scholarship within IR. In the past, the exogenous dimension was not very much theorised in European integration theory. The impact of globalisation is undeniable, which is increasingly accounted for in EU studies. As a result we see a potential for and a real process of cross-fertilisation and complementarity between EU studies and ‘new regionalism’ studies. This special issue is evidence of increased interaction and dialogue between EU studies scholar and those from new regionalism (also see Robinson et al, 2010; Telo, 2007). With this said, however, it is necessary to maintain some cautiousness, and we do not argue for an integrated research agenda. Globalisation has different causes and consequences in different parts of the world, and the particular position (and levels of development) of the various states and regions appears to result in particular (or uneven) relationships between regionalism and globalisation, which may not always be comparable. When the latter trend dominates, comparisons should primarily be made between states/regions at similar stages of development, rather than for instance comparing Africa and Europe. Here it is worth mentioning that EU studies scholars and their colleagues from IR interact to an increasing extent in the analysis of the EU’s external relations and its role as a global actor (Robinson et al 2010; Hill & Smith, 2005). The increasing number of academic conferences and networks on this topic also illustrate this trend, e.g. the GARNET network ([www.garnet-eu.org/](http://www.garnet-eu.org/)) and the bi-annual conference on “The EU in International Affairs” (organised by Egmont in Brussels).

Regarding the relationship between the state and regionalism, our primary result is that there is scope for increased dialogue and cross-fertilisation between EU studies and new regionalism studies, but that the nature of such dialogue depends heavily on theoretical perspective and basic assumptions about the state. The assumption of a strong and institutionalised European nation-state is central to a large part of EU studies. Liberal and realist theories of regionalism in IR makes similar assumptions, and there is a thus a certain compatibility (although perhaps not so much cross-fertilisation up to now).

Several constructivist and critical new regionalism scholars within IR have a different approach to the study of regionalism. They may either be asking different research questions regarding regional integration and regionalisation, and/or attempting to problematise the state-society complex (i.e. questioning the assumption about the strong and institutionalised nation-state). These assumptions often come naturally when focus is placed on post-colonial states in the developing world, even if it is worth mentioning that critical and constructivist new regionalism scholars sometimes also include Europe and the EU within

their remit (see Söderbaum & Shaw 2003; Hettne & Söderbaum 2000). What is interesting is that such unorthodox research questions and constructivist/critical theoretical perspectives have started to appear more frequently among EU scholars as well (at least partly as influx from IR), as seen in the so called constructivist and new/critical approaches to European integration (Wiener & Diez, 2009; Rosamond 2000). In other words, the European laboratory is diverse enough to enable cross-fertilisation between certain strands of EU studies and IR new regionalism studies.

By way of conclusion, comparing the EU with other forms of regionalism highlights the difficulty faced by scholars of comparative politics when moving across the divide separating advanced industrial states from developing countries/emerging economies. Strong state institutions and structures matter in the shaping of both national and regional governance; so does national wealth. Regions cannot separate themselves from the wealth and power of their members. Given the difficulties scholars of comparative politics face when trying to work across that divide, a focus on comparative regionalism should be viewed with both excitement and caution.

## Notes

1. For the early versions of the NRA, see the five-volume mini-series on New Regionalism edited by Hettne, Inotai and Sunkel (1999-2001). Söderbaum and Shaw (2003) give a comprehensive overview of the main strands within the new regionalism literature, whereas Söderbaum (2004a) is the most detailed account of the NRA hitherto. The NRA is currently being further developed by Söderbaum and Hettne in *Rethinking Regionalism* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

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