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## **Consolidating Comparative Regionalism: From Euro-centrism to Global Comparison\***

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### **Introduction**

Since the mid-1980s there has been an explosion of various forms of regionalist projects on a global scale. The widening and deepening of the European Union (EU) is the most pervasive example, but regionalism is also made visible through the revitalization or expansion of many other regional projects around the world, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Southern Common Market (Mercosur).

Today's regionalism is closely linked with the shifting nature of global politics and the intensification of globalization. Regionalism is characterized by the involvement of almost all governments in the world, but it also involves a rich variety of non-state actors, resulting in multiplicities of formal and informal regional governance and regional networks in most issue areas. This pluralism and multidimensionality of contemporary regionalism gives rise to a number of new puzzles and challenges for comparative politics.

Cumulative knowledge has grown within the study of regionalism and regional integration during the last two decades, especially on aspects of European integration, the institutional design of regional organizations, the problems of collective action on the regional level, and the relationship between globalization and regionalism. However, the challenges and weaknesses in the study of regionalism and regional integration are primarily related to the fragmented nature of this research field, in particular the weak debate around comparative analysis.

Despite a growing number of specific comparisons of selected aspects of regionalism (especially regarding regional institutions and the role of power) in selected regions (particularly in the Triad: Europe, East Asia and North America), there is a weak systematic debate regarding the fundamentals of comparison, such as “what to compare”, “how to compare” or “why compare”. Consequently, the purpose of this chapter is to contribute to the general discussion about “the problem of comparison” in the study of regionalism and regional integration. It does not attempt a detailed empirical comparison of a set of pre-defined regions according to a fixed set of variables. The chapter will provide an overview of the state of comparative regional integration and regionalism, an outline of the main debates and controversies, and a discussion of the state of the research field and directions in which it ought to be moving.

This paper is organized in four main sections. The first discusses the main concepts in the field, and the implications of this for comparative analysis. The second provides an overview of the development of the early and the more recent debates on regional integration and regionalism in terms of theoretical focus, empirical practices and the treatment of comparative analysis. The third and most extensive section provides an overview of the debates about regionalism in some of the most critical regions of the world in this regard (Europe, East Asia, the Americas, and Africa), highlighting in particular the tension between regional specialization and comparative analysis. The chapter concludes with suggestions for improving the comparative element in the study of regionalism and regional integration.

## **Conceptualizations**

It is natural to begin with the problem of definition, notwithstanding that such an exercise has often proved problematic, due to the fact that regional integration and regionalism are elusive and evolving concepts. Definitions are of course essential in comparative research, since the definition and choice of what is a comparable case will affect the ability to generalize. There have also been shifting and competing views regarding the dependent variable, which also results in problems in comparison.

The concept of “region” derives from the Latin word for “regio”, which means direction (Jönsson *et al* 2000: 15). It also derives from the Latin verb “regere”: “to rule” or “to command”. Later in history the concept of region denoted border or a delimited space, often a province. Historically the concept of region has been evolved primarily as a space between the national and the local within a particular state. These types of regions are here referred to as micro-regions. The concept of region can also refer to macro-regions (so-called world regions), which are larger territorial (as distinct from non-territorial) units or sub-systems, between the state level and the global system level.

The macro-region has been the most common object of analysis in international studies, while micro-regions have more commonly been considered in the realm of the study of domestic politics and economics. In current international affairs, with blurred distinctions between the domestic and the international, micro-regions have increasingly become cross-border in nature, precipitating an emerging debate about the relationship between macro-

regionalism and micro-regionalism within the context of globalization (Perkmann and Sum 2003; Söderbaum 2005).

The minimum classical definition of a macro-region is “a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence” (Nye 1971: vii). During the early debate about regional integration a large amount of research capacity was invested in trying to define regions scientifically (Cantori and Spiegel 1970); a plethora of opinions were advanced regarding what mutual interdependencies mattered the most (such as economic, political and social variables, or historical, cultural and ethnic bonds). The results of this research were not compelling, however, and parsimonious attempts to define regions have essentially come to an end. Most scholars engaged in the contemporary debate agree that there are no natural or “scientific” regions, and that definitions of a region vary according to the particular problem or question under investigation. This problem about how to define a region may pose certain challenges for comparative analysis, but many scholars solve the problem by concentrating on regional organizations and regional economic frameworks (Fawcett and Hurrell 1995; Acharya and Johnston 2007), or security complexes/communities (Adler and Barnett 1998; Buzan and Waever 2003), which tend to make cases more “comparable”.

The view that regions must not be taken for granted or be reduced to regional organizations is particularly emphasized in constructivist and post-structuralist scholarship. As Jessop (2003: 183) points out, “rather than seek an elusive objective ... criterion for defining a region, one should treat regions as emergent, socially constituted phenomena.” From such a perspective, all regions are socially constructed and hence politically contested. Emphasis is placed on how political actors perceive and interpret the idea of a region and notions of “regionness” (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000). It is clear that such (inter)subjective understandings of regions pose certain challenges for systematic comparison.

Just as there are competing understandings about how to define a region, there are many contrasting and sometimes incompatible definitions of related concepts. One distinction is between regional cooperation and regional integration. Regional cooperation can be defined as an open-ended process, whereby individual states (or possibly other actors) within a given geographical area act together for mutual benefit, and in order to solve common tasks, in certain fields, such as infrastructure, water and energy, notwithstanding conflicting interests in other fields of activity. Regional integration refers to a deeper process, whereby the previously autonomous units are merged into a whole. A fruitful distinction is between political integration (the formation of a transnational political system), economic integration (the formation of a transnational economy) and social integration (the formation of a transnational society) (Nye 1971: 26-7).

The concepts of regionalism and regionalization have entered the discussion during the recent debate.<sup>1</sup> “Regionalism” represents the policy and project, whereby state and non-state actors cooperate and coordinate strategy within a particular region or as a type of world order. It is usually associated with a formal programme, and often leads to institution building. “Regionalization” refers to the process of cooperation, integration, cohesion and identity creating a regional space (issue-specific or general). “At its most basic it means no more than a concentration of activity — of trade, peoples, ideas, even conflict — at the

regional level. This interaction may give rise to the formation of regions, and in turn to the emergence of regional actors, networks, and organisations” (Fawcett 2005: 25). The majority of studies in this field of political science continue to focus on the policies of (formal and largely state-led) regionalism as opposed to the processes of regionalization (Fawcett and Hurrell 1995; Gamble and Payne 1996), although there is, as we should see below, an increasing amount of research on the relationship between regionalism and regionalization.

In summary, regions, regional cooperation, regional integration, regionalism and regionalization are contested concepts that are used differently across disciplines, and frequently also within disciplines. Communication between different standpoints has been difficult because of the incomparability between different phenomena, resulting in problems of not only what to compare, how to compare, but also why to compare at all.

### **Early and recent debates on regionalism: continuities and discontinuities**

The phenomenon of regional integration/regionalism can be traced far back in history, as seen in the rich variety of geographically confined “Staatenbünde”, “leagues”, “unions”, “pacts” and “confederations” (Mattli 1999: 1). The protectionist and neo-mercantilist trend of the 1930s is considered by some to have been the first main wave of regionalism. However, more often it is argued that voluntary and comprehensive regionalism is predominantly a post-World War II phenomenon, which therefore (according to some definitions) reduces the number of cases of regionalism. It is common to distinguish between an earlier wave of regionalism in the 1950s and 1960s (then often referred to as “regional integration”) and a more recent wave or generation of regionalism (often referred to as “new regionalism”) beginning in the latter half of the 1980s and now a prevalent phenomenon throughout the world. But after more than two decades of so-called “new regionalism”, the distinction between “old” and “new” has lost much of its original meaning (Hettne 2003; 2005). It is arguably more appropriate to identify continuities and discontinuities between what can be understood as the early and the more recent debates.

#### *The early debate<sup>ii</sup>*

The early or classical approaches to regional integration were foremost concerned with peace, and tended to view the nation-state as the problem rather than the solution. The most relevant theories were federalism, functionalism, neofunctionalism and transactionalism (Rosamond 2000). Federalism, which inspired the pioneers of European integration, was less a theory than a political programme; it was sceptical of the nation-state, although its project was in fact to create a new kind of “state”. In Europe there was no obvious theorist associated with federalism, whereas, functionalism has been much strongly identified with David Mitrany (1966).

Functionalism was primarily a strategy (or a normative method) designed to build

peace, constructed around the proposition that the provision of common needs and functions can unite people across state borders. Form, in the functionalist view, was supposed to follow function, whereas for federalists it was primarily form that mattered. Functional cooperation should concentrate on technical and basic functional programmes and projects within clearly defined sectors. Usually, the nation-state should be bypassed, and international cooperation was preferred to regional cooperation. Mitrany criticized both federalism and neofunctionalism on the basis that both were primarily based on territory rather than function. He saw territoriality as part of the Westphalian logic, which was taken to imply conflict and war, although Mitrany considered the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) an acceptable organization.

Neofunctionalism enjoyed an enormous reputation during the 1960s. The central figure was Ernst Haas, who challenged the functionalists, and claimed a greater concern for the centres of power (Haas 1958; 1964). Haas in fact theorized the “community method” pioneered by Jean Monnet. Even if the outcome of this method could be a federation, it was not to be constructed through constitutional design. The basic mechanism in neofunctionalist theorizing was “spill-over”, which referred to “the way in which the creation and deepening of integration in one economic sector would create pressures for further economic integration within and beyond that sector, and greater authoritative capacity at the European level” (Rosamond 2000: 60).

In the 1960s the neofunctional description (and prescription) became increasingly remote from the empirical world, now dominated by Charles de Gaulle’s nationalism. Stanley Hoffman (1966) asserted that regional integration could not spread from “low politics” (economics) to the sphere of “high politics” (security), contrary to the stipulations of the (neo)functionalists. Perceptions of the role of the EC began to diverge. According to Alan Milward (1992) and the intergovernmentalist response, the EC should instead be seen as a “rescue of the nation-state”.

Haas responded to critics by labelling the study of regional integration “pre-theory” (on the basis that there was no clear idea about dependent and independent variables), then referred to the field in terms of “obsolescence”, and ended up suggesting that the study of regional integration should cease to be a subject in its own right (Haas 1975). Rather, it should be seen as an aspect of the study of interdependence (a concept popularized at that time by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye). In retrospect it would appear that the neofunctionalists expected too much too quickly. They underestimated the anti-pluralist, centralist and nationalist orientations of their time, at the same time as the theory had relatively little regard for exogenous and extra-regional forces (Breslin and Higgott 2000).

The early debate was always centred on Europe, and Europe was in many ways treated as a single case. Gradually the comparative element in the field grew stronger and some of the most respected (mainly neofunctionalist) theorists of their time also conducted comparisons. For instance, Ernst Haas, Philippe Schmitter and Sydney Dell studied regional integration (or the lack of it) in Latin America (Haas and Schmitter 1964; Haas 1967; Schmitter 1970; Dell 1966). Amitai Etzioni compared the United Arab Republic, the Federation of West Indies, the Nordic Association and the European Economic Community (Etzioni 1965). Joseph Nye studied East Africa and conducted comparisons of the Arab

League, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) (Nye 1970; 1971).

Even if many of these and other like-minded scholars were conscious of their own Eurocentrism, they searched above all for those “background conditions”, “functional equivalents” and “spill-over” effects that were derived from the study of Europe. As Breslin et al (2002: 2) point out, they “used the European experience as a basis for the production of generalizations about the prospects for regional integration elsewhere”. This resulted in difficulties in identifying comparable cases, or anything that corresponded to their definition of “regional integration”. As will be discussed below, the treatment of European integration as the primary case or “model” of regional integration still dominates many of the more recent studies of regionalism and regional integration, which is an important part of “the problem of comparison” within this research area. Nonetheless, the rigour with which earlier theorists undertook comparative analysis can serve as an inspiration for the development of a more genuinely “comparative” regionalism.

What can be broadly understood as a model for regionalism among developing countries emerged in response to the Europe-centred classical models in political science (particularly neofunctionalism) and economics (particularly neoclassical market integration) during the early debate. This model can be understood within the structuralist tradition of economic development, pioneered by Gunnar Myrdal, Arthur Lewis, and Raul Prebisch (Prebisch 1963). From this perspective the rationale of regional cooperation and integration among less developed countries was not to be found in functional cooperation or marginal economic change within the existing structure, but rather, through the fostering of “structural transformation” and the stimulation of productive capacities, whereby investment and trading opportunities were being created. This school thus shifted focus away from economic integration as a means of political unification to one of regional economic cooperation/integration as a means of economic development. Hence the dependent variable, as well as the underlying conditions for regionalism, were so different that it called for a different theory, according to which Europe and the developing world were not comparable cases (Axline 1994a: 180).

### *The recent debate<sup>iii</sup>*

The 1970s was a period of “Eurosclerosis” within the EC, but the 1985 White Paper on the internal market and the Single European Act resulted in a new dynamic process of European integration. This was also the start of what has often been referred to as the “new regionalism” on a global scale. To some observers regionalism was “new”, mainly in the sense that it represented a revival of protectionism or neomercantilism (Bhagwati 1993). But most observers highlighted the fact that closure of regions was not on the agenda; rather, the current regionalism was to be understood as “open regionalism” (Anderson and Blackhurst 1993; Cable and Henderson 1994). Indeed, one of the characterizing features of the more recent debate on regionalism, especially within the field of international relations, is its focus

on the conditions related to what has increasingly been called globalization, occurring in the context after the end of the Cold War. There are many ways in which globalization and regionalism interact and overlap, according to this type of scholarship (Bøås *et al*, 1999; Cooper *et al* 2008; Coleman and Underhill 1998; Farrell *et al* 2005; Hettne *et al* 1999; Schulz *et al* 2001).

One prominent scholar of the recent debate, Björn Hettne, emphasizes that regionalism needs to be understood both from an exogenous perspective (according to which regionalization and globalization are intertwined articulations of global transformation) and from an endogenous perspective (according to which regionalization is shaped from within the region by a large number of different actors) (Hettne 2002). As mentioned above, the exogenous perspective has primarily developed during the recent debate, whereas the endogenous perspective underlines the continuities back to functionalist and neofunctionalist theorizing about the integration of Europe, the role of agency and the long-term transformation of territorial identities. But in contrast with the time in which Haas and the early regional integration scholars were writing, today there are many regionalisms and thus a very different base for comparative studies. It is apparent that neither the object for study (ontology) nor the way of studying it (epistemology) has remained static. One indication of this is the emergence of a rich variety of theoretical frameworks for the study of regionalism and regional integration.<sup>iv</sup> Indeed, current regionalism may be seen as a new political landscape in the making, characterized by an increasing set of actors (state and non-state) operating on the regional arena and across several interrelated dimensions (security, development, trade, environment, culture, and so on).

Historically the study of regional cooperation and integration has strongly emphasized states as actors, or political unification within (formal) regional organizations — although neofunctionalist, institutionalist and especially transactionalist approaches certainly consider the underlying social fabric of non-state actors and interest groups. In contrast, many recent perspectives have placed additional emphasis on “soft”, de facto or informal regionalism/regionalization, acknowledging the fact that a rich variety of non-state actors have begun to operate within as well as beyond state-led institutional frameworks. For instance, business interests and multinationals not only operate on the global sphere, but also tend to create regionalized patterns of economic activity (Rugman 2005). Similarly, civil society is often neglected in the study of regionalism, notwithstanding that its impact is increasing, as evident in the transnational activist networks and processes of civil society regionalization emerging around the world (Acharya 2003; Warleigh 2001; Söderbaum 2007).

As mentioned earlier, the distinction and causal relationship between formal and informal regionalism (or between state-led regionalism and non-state regionalization) has attracted considerable attention during the recent debate. Key issues in this debate are whether or not formal regionalism precedes informal regionalization, and the various ways in which state, market, and civil society actors relate and come together in different formal and informal coalitions, networks and modes of regional and multilevel governance (Bøås *et al* 2005; Christiansen and Piattoni 2004; Katzenstein and Shiraishi 1997; Sandholtz and Stone-Sweet 1998). According to Breslin *et al* (2002: 13) the distinction between formal and informal regionalism helps “break out of the teleological shackles of the first wave and may

help us to move our focus to different types of regional response [and] to more issue-specific questions”. From a comparative perspective, the fundamental problem is that the current field of study is still fragmented, lacking communication between the many theoretical standpoints and various regional debates.

### **Comparing debates on regionalism in Europe, East Asia, the Americas and Africa**

This section provides an overview and compares some of the main features of the debates about regionalism in Europe, East Asia, the Americas, and Africa. Worldwide regionalism is not, of course, restricted to these regions, but the “sample” is broad enough to illustrate the pluralism of contemporary regionalism.

The ambition in this section is to describe and compare some of the general characteristics of each regional debate, rather than attempt to compare pre-defined regions or regional organizations according to a fixed and narrow set of variables (an exercise which would not be able to address the more general problem of comparison in this area of research). It should be stated that the analysis draws attention to the tension between regional specialization and comparative research. The main reason for this tension is that the majority of scholars tend to specialize in a particular region — regardless what discipline they come from (comparative politics, international relations, area studies). Sometimes comparisons are made within each region (for instance, comparing the different regionalisms in Asia), and an increasing number of scholars compare across regions as well. The fundamental problem is that many case studies and the vast majority of comparisons tend to use theoretical frameworks that are biased towards European integration theory and practice. Indeed, as this section will draw attention to, the comparative element is underdeveloped and European integration has become an obstacle for the developing a comparative regionalism and regional integration.<sup>v</sup>

#### *Debates about regionalism in Europe*

Europe has a long history of integrative and disintegrative processes (Mattli 1999). During recent decades the regionalization process has ultimately centred around one dominant project – what is today the EU – which has widened and deepened in scope, reach and ambition to a remarkable degree. Historically, an intense debate has swirled around varieties of realist/intergovernmental and functional/liberal/institutional perspectives. These different approaches focus largely on different aspects of the integration process. For instance, realists and intergovernmentalists appear to have the most to say about the logic behind large Council meetings and treaty reforms such as Maastricht, Amsterdam, and Nice (Moravcsik 1998; Grieco 1997). Meanwhile, the functional/liberal/institutional approaches focus more on economic integration and other issue areas (especially under the first pillar) in which the EU’s central institutions such as the Commission and the Court and have a more prominent role



(Sandholtz and Stone-Sweet 1998; Pollack 2003).

Other scholars emphasize other variables again, such as the fundamentally changed political landscape in Europe, blurring the distinction between international and domestic politics. One such perspective is “multilevel governance”, which posits that power and decision-making in Europe are not concentrated at one level (national or supranational), but are rather characterized by a complex web of relations between public and private actors nested in supranational, national and micro-regional levels (Hooghe and Marks 2001).

In recent years social constructivism has 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 international relations, and as a means of transcending the rather introverted debates between the conventional and rationalist theories of European integration referred to initially. The social constructivist approach emphasizes 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 (rather than EU *per se*) (Christiansen *et al* 2001). This theoretical approach has undoubtedly revitalized the study of European integration, but it makes its comparisons between Europe and international regimes rather than between Europe and other regions. There is therefore considerable scope for an increase in comparison of the social construction of various global regions.

The lack of communication and interaction between EU studies and regionalism in the rest of the world is stark, although some recent attempts have begun to remedy this lack (Telo 2007; Laursen 2003; Warleigh 2004; 2006). Indeed, there has been a tendency within EU studies during the recent decade to consider the EU as a nascent, if unconventional, polity in its own right (the “n=1” problem). This view holds that the EU should be studied as a political system rather than as a project of regional integration or regionalism (Caporaso and Keeler 1995; Hix 1994; 1999). The corollary is that established tools of political science and comparative politics should be used in EU studies and that international studies and relations are not equipped to deal with the complexity of contemporary EU.<sup>vi</sup> This view has also reinforced the notion that the EU is sui generis, thereby downplaying the similarities between the EU and other regionalist projects. According to Ben Rosamond, one prominent EU scholars, the parochialism inherent in this particular strand of EU studies has contributed little in deepening our understanding of the EU as a political system. He argues that EU studies should return to the broader ambitions of the comparative and classical regional integration theory (especially neofunctionalism), at least to the extent of developing generalizable and comparative conceptual and theoretical frameworks (Rosamond 2005).

### *Debates about regionalism in East Asia*

There exists no overall consensus for a definition of the Asian region or about the fundamental nature of regionalism in Asia. The meaning of regionalism has changed in relation to the question of what sub-regions to include and exclude, what dimensions of

regionalism to investigate (such as security, economics, politics and identity) and over the particular theoretical perspectives employed. Conventionally Asia has been divided into the regions Central Asia, Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia, with a blurred border towards the Middle East. Most literature in relation to regionalism has focused on East Asia, that is, Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. Since East Asia is arguably the most interesting region, from a theoretical, empirical as well as comparative perspective, it is also the focus adopted here.

A considerable body of literature is concerned with the study of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (see Acharya 2001). A major reason for this emphasis, at least historically, appears to be that ASEAN has been one of the few sustainable regional organizations in the larger East Asian region. During the Cold War the core of ASEAN cooperation was in its joint effort to consolidate the member nation states and to enhance stability. These goals were driven by a narrow political elite in what were, at that time, relatively fledgling and fragile state formations. Communism was the primary internal and external threat. The *raison d'être* of ASEAN – bulwarking against communist expansion – has of course been long absent from the political landscape; focus has shifted to achieving increased economic development and to ensuring security in a new context.

During recent decades an important part of the debate about regionalism in East Asia has focused on collective identity formation and informal or “soft” regionalism (Acharya 2001; Katzenstein 2002). This scholarship seeks to account for the non-legalistic style of decision-making in this region, and the fact that there is no transfer of national sovereignty to a supranational authority. Nevertheless, there exists a dense network of informal gatherings, working groups and advisory groups, particularly within ASEAN, but also in the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), and more recently the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan and the Republic of Korea). This informal style of decision-making incorporates its own innate code of conduct that is often referred to as the “ASEAN Way”, which, in contrast with European-style formal bureaucratic structures and legalistic decision-making procedures, is built around discretion, informality, pragmatism, consensus-building, and non-confrontational bargaining styles (Acharya 1997: 329). Further, the ASEAN Way reflects to an extent the illiberal underpinnings of the “Asian values” construct, which stresses a communitarian ethic (“society over the self”) in explaining the region’s economic dynamism (Acharya 2002: 27-8).

The 1997/98 Asian financial crisis underlined not only the interdependence of Northeast and Southeast Asian countries, but, according to Higgott (2002: 2), also “exposed the weakness of existing regional institutional economic arrangements”. This in turn appears also to have undermined the confidence in the soft institutionalism of the “ASEAN Way” and underscored the need for deeper institutionalization and stronger commitments from countries. Following the region’s recovery from the 1997/98 financial crisis the East Asian countries moved to institutionalize annual leaders’ summits and ministerial dialogues through the ASEAN+3 (China, Japan and the Republic of Korea) framework. The most concrete project is the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI), which was adopted in May 2000 in order to provide emergency foreign currency liquidity support in the event of a future financial crisis.

But broader cooperation also exists across a range of areas such as small and medium-scale industry development, human resource development, agriculture, tourism, and information technology (Nesudurai 2005: 167). It is too early to see what institutional structures will emerge, but as Higgott (2006: 32) points out, “the range of interactions developing is unprecedented, with a considerable number of regular meetings across most policy domains, especially economics and finance, agriculture, forestry (and) tourism.” He also stresses that to “see ASEAN+3 as but an exercise in extended conference diplomacy, reflecting weakness rather than strength, would be misleading” (ibid).

Most research concerning East Asian regionalism is based on case studies rather than comparisons. There are an increasing number of regional processes in East Asia, which provide a large base for comparison within the region. Generally speaking, studies on East Asian regionalism present a significant number of loose comparisons with, or sweeping references to, European integration theories and practices. The great majority of such references or comparisons with Europe characterize East Asian regionalism as looser and more informal, sometimes even as “underdeveloped” (Choi and Caporaso 2002: 485). It is problematic to regard EU-style institutionalization as an ideal model for regionalism. A particularly effective remedy for such misplaced comparison with European integration is the edited collection by Bertrand Fort and Douglas Webber (2006), *Regional Integration in East Asia and Europe: Convergence or Divergence?* Amitav Acharya (2006: 312-3), a leading scholar on East Asian regionalism and contributor to this book, points out that rather than elevating the European model over the Asian experience as a preferred model of regionalism, it is more productive to recognize that regional cooperation is a difficult and contested process that will throw up different, equally legitimate, outcomes. There is room for a more mutually reinforcing cross-fertilization in the study of European, East Asian, and also other regionalisms. There is, for instance, no reason to believe that soft institutionalism is a uniquely Asian phenomenon. Further, comparisons should not be limited to contemporary Asia and Europe, but would benefit from considering regionalism experience across various time periods.

### *Debates about regionalism in the Americas*

Historically the Americas have been divided and described according to North America, Latin America and the Caribbean. Since the end of the Cold War this division has become increasingly inadequate for understanding regional processes on the American continent. There are strong convergences both within Latin America and between Latin America and North America. As Phillips (2005: 58) asserts, “(t)he most profitable way of proceeding is therefore to abandon traditional categories in favour of a mode of analysis which seeks to advance an integrated understanding of the Americas as a region, the various parts of which are best disaggregated into ... distinctive but interlocking subregions” (that is, Andean, Caribbean, Central America, North America and the Southern Cone).

An important aspect of the transformation of the Americas is linked to the changing

strategy of the US and to the consolidation of, and resistance towards, neoliberal policies. Although there is a plethora of subregional projects across the Americas, most attention in the debate has focused on NAFTA in the north, and Mercosur in the south. These two projects are intriguing from a comparative perspective and they are therefore contrasted here.

The origins of NAFTA can be traced to the growing concerns of Canada and Mexico that protectionist US policies could potentially devastate their economies (Pastor 2005: 220). NAFTA was preceded by a bilateral free trade agreement between Canada and the USA; when a similar agreement was proposed between Mexico and the US, Canada sought a tripartite agreement. Mexico's involvement is particularly intriguing. Mexico's tradition of a combined nationalism, protectionism, and "anti-gringoism" is still evident, but the country's self-reliance based on an oil economy has now lost credibility. Mexico, which had earlier harboured the ambition of becoming a regional power, was the first Latin American country to conclude, in joining NAFTA in 1992, that a free trade policy was the path out of stagnation.

The North American integration process is characterized by a close cooperation between the US administration and American business interests. The NAFTA proposals were hotly debated in the US, where criticism focused particularly on the issues of migration, the relocation of manufacturing industries to Mexico and, to some extent, environment and labour issues. In Canada and Mexico, discussion concerning NAFTA predominantly related to the particular neoliberal character of the agreement and the dominant position of the US. It is hard to dispute that the NAFTA project is elite-driven and based on a neoliberal philosophy. Significantly, opposition to the project from civil society has taken a regional form. According to Marchand (2001: 210), the "hyperliberal" NAFTA constitutes the worst of the new regionalism in North America, while the mobilization of a regionalized civil society constitutes the best of the new regionalism in North America.

NAFTA maintains a strong emphasis on trade and market liberalization in combination with a weak institutional structure and weak political ambitions, respecting the sovereignty of each member state, which contrasts sharply with the emphasis on deep and institutional integration of the EU. Although the NAFTA treaty is binding on its member states and involves certain dispute settlement mechanisms, these are *ad hoc* and NAFTA's objectives are limited to the regulation of trade and investment flows and the protection of property rights. "The style of NAFTA's governance is laissez-faire, reactive, and legalistic: problems are defined by plaintiffs and settled by litigation" (Pastor 2005: 220).

While NAFTA emerged more or less as a consequence of US bilateralism, Mercosur emerged both as a consequence of the democratic and economic reforms in Brazil and Argentina, and as a planned and intended regional venture. Mercosur has been described in terms of "open regionalism" (*regionalismo abierto*) (ECLAC 1994), pointing to that it is an outward-oriented regional response to the challenges of economic globalization and a mechanism for the governments to "lock in" economic and political reform programmes. In this sense Mercosur represents a clear shift in the integration model in South America away from the inward-oriented model of the past. According to Alvaro Vasconcelos (2007: 166), the main motivation of the Mercosur lay in the desire to create a common market labelled on the European Community. In the 1990s Mercosur was widely considered a "success"

(Malamoud 2003), particularly because the participant countries agreed on far-reaching tariff liberalization, and because of the significant increase in the level of intra-regional trade, at least compared with previous failed projects, such as the Latin American Integration Association (LAIA). However today's Mercosur faces serious problems, largely stemming from the crisis set off in 2002-3 in the context of Free Trade of the Americas (FTAA) negotiation, from which Mercosur has not fully emerged.

Mercosur has been a strongly statist project. Its formal institutions are weak and directly dependent on national administrations, which are responsible for the coordination and preparation of negotiations between the member governments. This can be understood as an intergovernmental negotiating structure, or as "presidentialism", the latter should, according to Malamud (2003: 56), be seen as a "functional equivalent" to regional institutions within the EU. The intergovernmental institutions exist alongside an embryonic legal doctrine in two areas: common trade regulations and a system for the resolution of disputes. The number of issues that inevitably require community-level regulation has grown. However, the key member states (especially Brazil) appear to prefer "political" and intergovernmental solutions in lieu of the "legal" avenue through the supranational court of justice. Brazil's individualistic strategy implies weak central institutions and trade integration only. Conversely, Brazil favours a strengthened political role for Mercosur in the Americas, as a mechanism of resistance towards the US, including the FTAA. It appears that this emphasis on political counterweight has been emphasized with Venezuela's entry into the organization in 2006. In this sense Mercosur might represent a Latin alternative, resisting "North Americanization", reminiscent of earlier models of regionalism in Latin America.

There is a rich base for comparative analysis in the Americas in time and space, due to the considerable number of old and more recent regional projects across the Americas. Empirically most of the comparisons conducted are between subregional frameworks within the Americas in general, or more specifically within Latin America. However, as far as theory and cross-regional comparison are concerned, the EU is by far the most salient point of reference or model, particularly when we are dealing with variations on the theme of the common market model rather than the free trade model. This implies that European integration theory and practice strongly influences the debate in and comparisons with Latin America, but not as much regarding NAFTA or the FTAA.<sup>vii</sup>

### *Debates about regionalism in Africa*

The ideological foundation of regional cooperation and integration in Africa is evidenced in the pan-African visions and series of treaties developed within the framework of the OAU and more recently the African Union (AU) and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) (Asante 1997; Murithi 2005; Taylor 2005). While earlier strategies were built around state-led industrialization, import substitution and collective self-reliance, the dominant view today is that Africa "must unite" in order to avoid marginalization in the global economy and instead exploit the opportunities provided by economic globalization.

Indeed, an overarching market-orientation in combination with EU-style institutionalization is the official strategy adopted by most of Africa's main regional cooperation and integration schemes, such as AU/NEPAD, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA).

The academic debate about regionalism in Africa often focuses on state-led regional integration frameworks. Two partly overlapping schools of thought dominate the debate. The first line of thinking is mainly associated with institutionalist and liberal lines of thought, concentrating on formal inter-state frameworks and/or official trade and investment flows, commonly with reference to the EC/EU as a comparative marker or model (Fourutan 1993; Holden 2001; Jenkins and Thomas 2001). What distinguishes the second, "pan-African", school of thought is synoptic overviews of African regional organizations and political-economic relationships, which are then coupled with demands for the strengthening of pan-African regional organizations and the so-called regional economic communities (RECs) of the envisioned African Economic Community (AEC) (Asante 1997; Muchie 2003). It is noteworthy that the pan-African line of thought often takes the EC/EU experience as inspiration and as a justification for the development of pan-African regionalism. Indeed, despite their foundational differences, the two strands of thought make implicit or explicit comparisons with the EU, and also come to similar conclusion that, notwithstanding the "failure" of regionalism in Africa hitherto, there is still great potential to build successful regionalism in the future.

A third and smaller group of scholars is more sceptical about whether the restructured regional organizations will be able to attain their goals of highly developed institutional frameworks – nearly always modelled on the EC/EU – with attendant economic and political integration. The scepticism of this group has generated a radically different interpretation of regionalism in Africa, associated with various approaches centering on critical political economy and new regionalism (Bach 1999; Bøås et al 2005; Grant and Söderbaum 2003; Hentz and Bøås 2003; Söderbaum 2004). These approaches transcend the narrow focus on inter-state regional frameworks, and obviate the artificial separation, in the African context, of state and non-state actors, that are associated with traditional regional approaches.

An important argument within this rather loose school of thought is the claim that many ruling regimes and political leaders in Africa engage in symbolic and discursive activities – praising the goals of regionalism and regional organizations, signing cooperation treaties and agreements, and taking part in "summitry regionalism" – while remaining uncommitted to, or unwilling to implement, jointly agreed policies. Regionalism is thus used as a discursive and image-boosting exercise: leaders demonstrate support and loyalty towards one another in order to raise the status, image and formal sovereignty of their often-authoritarian regimes, both domestically and internationally (Bøås 2003; Clapham 1996).

This type of "regime-boosting" regionalism may be a goal in itself, but it may also be closely related to "shadow regionalization"; what Bach refers to as "trans-state regionalization" (Bach 1999, 2005). Shadow regionalization draws attention to the potential

for public officials and various actors within the state to be entrenched in informal market activities in order to promote either their political goals or their private economic interests. This particular type of regionalization grows from below and is built upon rent seeking or the stimulation of patron-client relationships. Bach claims, for instance, that regional organizations constitute a means for “resource capture” and international patronage (Bach 2005). It implies regionalization without regional integration or formal regionalism.

Many of the shadow networks are closely tied to the complex wars on the African continent. Taking the example of the Great Lakes region, Taylor and Williams argue that for well-placed elites and business people the war in this region offers potentially substantial resources for those able to exploit them. Foreign involvement is not only about preserving national security and defeating enemies, but also about securing access to resource-rich areas and establishing privatized accumulation networks that can emerge and prosper under conditions of war and anarchy (Taylor and Williams 2001: 273).

In summary, both the mainstream and pan-African line of thought tend to elevate European integration theory and practice. Although the critical and new regionalism approaches are often cast within a general discussion about regionalism, there is little cross-fertilization and deep comparisons between Africa and regions in other parts of the world, including European integration. This is unfortunate, since it is unlikely that the phenomena highlighted through this scholarship are uniquely “African”. Any particularity appears to be related to the nature of the African state-society complex and Africa’s insertion in the global order. This specialization tends to reflect the tendency in the other regional debates, namely that many scholars tend to use specific contextual language to describe rather similar phenomena instead of applying general concepts and developing questions and hypotheses that can be transferred to cross-regional comparisons.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted deep divisions regarding the problem of comparison within the study of regionalism and regional integration. Contestations regarding what to compare, how to compare and sometimes even why to compare at all, arise predominantly as a consequence of the tension in the field between regional specialization (that is, in the form of case study or area study) and comparative research. The ongoing development of comparative regionalism rests therefore upon finding a more mutually reinforcing relationship between these standpoints. This section begins with some conclusions regarding the problematic role of European integration theory and practice for comparative regionalism, before outlining a general way of thinking about comparison which will be able to facilitate dialogue in this fragmented field of study.

### *The problem of European integration theory and practice in comparative regionalism*

This chapter reveals the tension between regional specialization and comparative research in the study of regionalism and regional integration. At least empirically, most scholars specialize in a particular region, which they will often consider “special” or “unique”. Even if intra-regional and cross-regional comparisons may be undertaken, there remains a strong bias towards European integration theory and practice in the field; most other regionalisms are compared — implicitly or explicitly — against the backdrop of European theory and practice.

Two broad attitudes towards comparative analysis within the field of regionalism are distinguishable, which revolve around two competing attitudes towards European integration theory and practice. One strand of thinking tends to elevate European integration theory and practice through comparative research, while the other is considerably less convinced of the advantages of comparative research and Europe-centred theories. The first perspective — especially variants of realist/intergovernmental and liberal/institutional scholarship — strongly emphasizes Europe-centred generalizations. This type of research has been dominated by a concern to explain variations from the “standard” European case. Indeed, other modes of regionalism are, where they appear, characterized as loose and informal (such as Asia) or “failed” (such as Africa), reflecting “a teleological prejudice informed by the assumption that ‘progress’ in regional organization is defined in terms of EU-style institutionalization” (Breslin *et al* 2002: 11). One reason for this 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) influence perceptions about how regionalism in other parts of the world does (and should) look. As the authoritative scholar, Andrew 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.”

Avoiding Europe-centredness has been an ongoing issue in the study of regionalism among developing countries and for critical scholarship in the field of international relations. There are persuasive reasons for taking stock of cumulative research on regional integration in the developing world and for being cautious regarding EU-style institutionalization inherent in most classical or mainstream perspectives or policies. Indeed, there have been a number of innovative efforts to develop a regional approach specifically aimed at the developing world (Axline 1994c; Bøås *et al* 1999). However even these perspectives tend to mirror the Europe-centred view, thus celebrating the differences in theory and practice between regionalism in Europe and in the developing world. According to Warleigh and Rosamond (2006) this has even resulted in a caricature of European integration or of classical regional integration theory, giving rise to unnecessary fragmentation within the field.

The barrier for achieving a nuanced comparative analysis is not European integration experience or theory *per se*, but rather the dominance of certain constructions and models of European integration. Conversely, discussions about regionalism in Africa or Asia have often reduced the EC/EU to the community method or a common market, or a simple point of



reference, or to a model/anti-model. Further, many comparisons and generalizations, which depart from the European context, are skewed through a lack of sensitivity to the issues around comparing regions with different levels of development and holding unequal positions in the current world order.

A more advanced debate about regionalism will not be reached through simply celebrating differences from European integration theory and practice, but rather in going beyond dominant interpretations of European integration, and drawing more broadly upon alternative theories (Diez and Wiener 2003; Rosamond 2000). To neglect Europe is to miss the opportunity to take advantage of the richness of the EU project and laboratory. As Warleigh and Rosamond (2006: 2) argue, comparative regionalism “cannot afford to lock itself away from the most advanced instance of regionalism in world politics”. The challenge for comparative regionalism is to both include and transcend European integration theory and practice. But this requires enhanced communication between various specializations and theoretical standpoints.

### *The future of comparative regionalism*

Some of the most informative studies in the field of regionalism are case studies or studies situated in debates within a particular region, such as Europe, East Asia, the Americas, or Africa. Detailed case studies of regionalism are certainly necessary; these identify historical and contextual specificities and allow for a detailed and “intensive” analysis of a single case (according to mono-, multi- or interdisciplinary studies). The disadvantage of case studies is, however, that a single case is a weak base for creating new generalization or invalidating existing generalizations (Axline 1994b: 15).<sup>viii</sup>

Comparative analysis has sometimes been heavily criticized by area specialists, post-modernists and others, who emphasize cultural relativism and the importance of a deep multidisciplinary knowledge of various contexts and people. Given that the comparative method is ultimately based on the same logic as “the experimental method”, it is reasonable that it should be used with care in the social sciences. But comparative analysis helps guard against ethnocentric bias and culture-bound interpretations that can arise when a specialization is over-contextualized or the area of study is too isolated.

The next step in the study of regionalism is to develop its comparative element, which will be crucial for enhancing cross-fertilization between various theoretical standpoints and regional specializations. For “when conducted properly, the comparative approach is an excellent tool ... In particular, it is a key mechanism for bringing area studies and disciplinary studies together, and enhancing both. It provides new ways of thinking about the case studies whilst at the same time allowing for the theories to be tested, adapted and advanced” (Breslin and Higgott 2000: 341).

While doing comparative research, it is crucial to move beyond the “false universalism” inherent in a selective reading of regionalism in the core, and in the EU in particular. As Hurrell (2005: 39) asserts, rather than trying to understand other regions

through the distorting mirror of Europe, it is better to think in general theoretical terms and in ways that draw both on traditional international relations theory, comparative politics and on other areas of social thought. This will only be possible if the case of Europe is integrated within a larger and more general discourse of comparative regionalism, built around general concepts and theories, but that remains culturally sensitive.

This calls for a middle ground to be established between context and case/area studies on the one hand, and “hard” social science as reflected in the use of “laborative” comparisons on the other. This middle ground has been referred to as the “eclectic center” of comparative studies (World Politics 1995; also see Africa Today 1997; Axline 1994c; Payne 1998). Such a middle ground can avoid the equal interlopers of exaggerated contextualization on the one hand, and over-generalized (or irrelevant) theory on the other. Achieving this perspective on the eclectic centre of comparative studies will be inclusive rather than exclusive — even if it will be too “social sciency” for some and too much of “storytelling” for others (World Politics 1995). There need not be any opposition between area studies and disciplinary studies/international studies, or between particularizing and universalizing studies. The eclectic center perspective should enable area studies, comparative politics and international studies to engage in a more fruitful dialogue, and through that process overcome the fragmentation in the field of regionalism and regional integration. Such perspective should be able to bridge divisions between earlier (“old”) and more contemporary (“new”) theories and experiences of regionalism and regional integration. It should also enable cross-fertilization between different regional debates and specializations. Finally, an eclectic centre perspective will highlight the richness of comparative analysis, and enhance a dialogue about the fundamentals of comparative analysis (for example, what constitute comparable cases, and the many different forms, methods and design of comparative analysis). This chapter will have achieved its aim if it has contributed to furthering such a dialogue.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Hurrell (1995: 39-45) makes a more nuanced distinction between five different categories of regionalism: (1) social and economic regionalization, (2) regional awareness and identity, (3) regional inter-state cooperation, (4) state-promoted regional integration, and (5) regional cohesion.

<sup>ii</sup> Parts of this section draw on Hettne and Söderbaum (2008). See also Hettne (2005).

<sup>iii</sup> According to Axline (1994b: 1-5) the evolution of regional cooperation since the 1950s can be divided into four (rather than two) generations of regional cooperation: (1) traditional free trade areas; (2) regional import substitution; (3) collective self-reliance; and (4) regional cooperation in the new world order (that is, the "recent debate").

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<sup>iv</sup> The recent debate has seen the proliferation of a large number of theories and approaches to regional integration and regionalism. For instance, Mansfield and Milner's (1997) The Political Economy of Regionalism highlights neorealist and neoliberal institutional theories, new trade theories and the new institutionalism. Theories of New Regionalism by Söderbaum and Shaw (2003) draws attention to variants of liberalism institutionalism, security complex theory, to a variety of constructivist, critical and 'new regionalism' approaches, such as the world order approach (WOA), new regionalism approach (NRA) and region-building approach. Laursen's Comparative Regional Integration (2003) emphasizes a variety of governmentalist, power, constructivist, neofunctionalist and historical institutionalist perspectives, whereas Wiener and Diez (2005) is a coherent exposé of the richness of European Integration Theory, highlighting: federalism, neo-neofunctionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, multi-level governance, policy networks, new institutionalisms, social constructivism, integration through law, discursive approaches and gender perspectives.

<sup>v</sup> At least three distinctions can be made regarding the impact of EU integration on other cases of regionalism: (i) EU as the paradigm of regionalism; (ii) EU as a model of regionalism; and (iii) the empirical relationship between EU and various world regions (which includes the EU's ideational and financial support of other regional organizations). These distinctions are analytically separate but rather difficult to keep completely apart.

<sup>vi</sup> See Rosamond (2000, ch. 7) for a detailed discussion about the relationship between EU studies and international studies. Also see Warleigh (2004; 2006).

<sup>vii</sup> Thanks to Nicola Phillips for this point.

<sup>viii</sup> According to Axline (1994b: 15-16), case studies must be cast within a comparative context in order to contribute to general propositions. Drawing on Lijphart's work, Axline clarifies that six types of case studies can give a cumulative contribution to knowledge: (i) atheoretical case studies, (ii) interpretive case studies, (iii) hypothesis-generating case studies, (iv) theory-confirming case studies, (v) theory-infirming case studies, and (vi) deviant case studies. Atheoretical case studies have little utility for generalization in themselves, but may indirectly lead to theory-generation. Interpretive case studies may or may not include a theoretical element, and may or may not contribute to generalizations applicable to a number of different cases. The other four types of case studies do contribute to the building of generalizable knowledge through their contribution to theory building.