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## **Theorising the Rise of Regionness**

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## **ABSTRACT**

We are witnessing a resurgence of regionalism in world politics. Drawing on the significant but rather diverse old and new theorising in the field, this article seeks to move towards a more coherent construction of a New Regionalism Theory (NRT), built around the core concept of ‘regionness’, indicating the multidimensional result of the process of regionalisation of a particular geographic area. The concept of regionness — ranging from regional space, regional complex, regional society, regional community to region-state — is outlined and suggested as a comparative analytical tool for understanding the emergence and construction of regions and the formation of relevant actors in a historical and multidimensional perspective. To some extent the five levels express a certain evolutionary logic, but there is, for sure, nothing deterministic with the rise of regionness. Furthermore, there are many regionalisms and the processes of regionalisation at different points in time provides various entry points into the globalised order for particular regions.

## Introduction

Regionalism has now, since more than a decade 'been brought back in' to international studies, after some time of almost complete neglect. The 'new regionalism' began to emerge in the mid-1980s in the context of the comprehensive structural transformation of the global system. Similar to the 'old regionalism' which began in the 1950s and stagnated in the 1970s, the new wave must be understood in its historical context. That is, it needs to be related to the structural transformation of the world, *inter alia* including (i) the move from bipolarity towards a multipolar or perhaps tripolar structure, with a new division of power and new division of labour; (ii) the relative decline of American hegemony in combination with a more permissive attitude on the part of the USA towards regionalism; (iii) the erosion of the Westphalian nation-state system and the growth of interdependence and 'globalisation', and (iv) the changed attitudes towards (neo-liberal) economic development and political system in the developing countries, as well as in the post-communist countries.<sup>1</sup>

The 'new regionalism' is a truly world-wide phenomenon, that is taking place in more areas of the world than ever before. Today's regionalism is extroverted rather than introverted, which reflects the deeper interdependence of today's global political economy and the intriguing relationship between globalisation and regionalisation. It should also be noted that the 'new regionalism' is simultaneously linked with domestic factors, sometimes challenging the nation-state while at other times strengthening it. Thus the renewed trend of regionalism is a complex process of change simultaneously involving state as well as non-state actors, and occurring as a result of global, regional,

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<sup>1</sup> On the re-emergence of regionalism and regionalisation, see Björn Hettne, Andras Inotai and Osvaldo

national and local level forces. It is not possible to state which level is dominant, because actors and processes at the various levels interact and their relative importance differ in time and space.

In the widest sense, 'regionalism' refers to the general phenomenon under study, i.e. the 'new' or 'second wave of regionalism' arising more or less all over the world today. In the analytical, operational sense it refers to the current ideology of regionalism, i.e. the urge for a regionalist order, either in a particular geographical area or as a type of world order. Regionalism in this particular sense is usually associated with a programme and strategy, and may lead to formal institution-building. 'Regionalisation' denotes the (empirical) process that leads to patterns of cooperation, integration, complementarity and convergence within a particular cross-national geographical space. It is important to distinguish formal regionalism (as ideology and programme) from the process of regionalisation. In Europe there is, for example, a strong anti-regionalist ideology in the form of neo-nationalism which does not necessarily prevent regionalisation on the ground from taking place. In our view, the empirical study of regionalisation has been neglected due to excessive focus on regionalist projects and regionalism as ideology. Regionalisation implies increasing 'regionness'. Thus the latter concept is a way to investigate the state of regionalisation in various dimensions and contexts and to compare various situations.

In spite of the recent mushrooming of research in this academic field, we still need to learn more about the 'whys' and 'hows' of regionalisms, how regionalisation is socially constructed, why some regions develop into higher levels of regionness while others do not, and what are the world order implications. That is, the overall puzzle to explain, understand, predict and prescribe the emergence, dynamics and consolidation

of regionalisation — i.e. rising regionness — in world politics remains only partly resolved. This is mainly explained by the lack of adequate theory. Our ambition in this article is therefore to suggest a basis for the development of a more coherent theoretical perspective for studying the dynamics of regionalisation, focusing on the concept of regionness.

It may still be somewhat premature to outline a theory of the ‘new regionalism’ in full, but it should be possible to say what we should expect from it. A theory of the ‘new regionalism’ cannot be about emerging regions only. It has to be a theory about the world order in transformation and the emergence of a multilevel pattern of governance. The New Regionalism Theory (NRT) has to explain the world order that makes processes of regionalisation possible, or even necessary, and the world order that may result from new regionalisms in interaction. Note the plural. Analysts of the renewed trend of regionalisation emphasise that there are many regionalisms and regionalisation processes, i.e. different regional projects and different types of regional activities.

The world order approach does not prevent a particular focus on the regions, which is important both for empirical and normative reasons. Empirical because we do not yet know enough about the emerging regional formations, normative because the point is to question some consequences of globalisation and discuss the possibility of a ‘return of the political’ in the form of regionalism. Somewhat ironically, there is increasing agreement even among ‘globalists’ that some ‘regulation’ is needed in the world political economy; the question is how, by whom and for whom.

The article is structured as follows. We start off with some meta-theoretical points of departure before outlining the five levels of regionness in the main section of the

paper. We then briefly discuss the relation between regionness and the recent revival of ‘security communities’, made by Adler and Barnett. In the conclusion we draw the strings together and briefly sketch a NRT research agenda.

### **Meta-theoretical postulates**

We should briefly describe our meta-theoretical points of departures: (i) global social theory; (ii) social constructivism and (iii) comparative regional studies.

#### *Global social theory<sup>2</sup>*

Since the ‘new regionalism’ is closely linked to global structural change and globalisation, it cannot be understood merely from the point of view of the single region in question. What we are looking for specifically is global theory that takes regional peculiarities into consideration. This is not only motivated by the need to understand particular regions, because to better understand society in general is also to better understand a particular region. Good theory makes sense of ongoing events, it explains where we are, how we got there, and where we are going (without necessarily being able to forecast everything on the way). Good theory also makes it possible to act in order to improve our situation, but since we are not all sitting in the same boat, it also differentiates between different we-categories and facilitates a dialogue between different worldviews and standpoints.

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<sup>2</sup> For a further elaboration, see Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum, ‘Towards Global Social Theory’, *JIRD. Journal of International Relations and Development. Special Issue: Rethinking Development Theory*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (December, 1999).

Global social theory means a comprehensive social science that abandons state-centrism in an ontologically fundamental sense. Social processes must be analysed delinked from national space. As emphasised by the late Susan Strange, it is not our job to defend or excuse the ‘Westfailure system’.<sup>3</sup> Somewhat simplistically we speak in favour of a marriage between certain strands in development theory and international political economy (IPE), or rather political economy (PE), since ‘international’ does no longer need mentioning. Such a merger may ultimately strengthen an emerging ‘new’ or ‘critical political economy’, dealing with historical power structures, emphasising contradictions in them, as well as change and transformation expressed in normative terms (i.e. development).<sup>4</sup> This much needed focus on history is an escape from unchanging transhistorical theory, artificially imposed on an ever changing reality, and characterising what still is mainstream international theory (i.e. IR and IPE).

Global social theory must go beyond the mystifications of the concept of globalisation, distinguishing the new aspects from the old and specifying what concrete dimensions are involved and how they are related, *if* they are related. Globalisation cannot just be taken for granted, neither should the privilege of defining the phenomenon be left to the ideological ‘globalists’.

Global social theory, furthermore, has to come to terms with the micro-macro relation since the distinction between international and domestic is being transcended. Conventionally analysts within the field of IR/IPE and international economics have

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Strange, ‘The Westfailure system’, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (1999), pp. 345-354.

been concerned mainly with the ‘big’ processes of macro-regionalism, primarily in and between the three core regions, Europe, North America and Asia Pacific, often with focus on EU, NAFTA and APEC, or other regional organisations such as ASEAN, MERCOSUR, SADC and ECOWAS and so on.<sup>5</sup> In other academic disciplines, such as geography, regional and cultural studies, urban planning and so on, the main focus has been placed on the sub-national or cross-border regions, such as the Euro-regions, growth polygons, growth triangles and development corridors in Asia, North America and Africa, as well as the micro-states such as Singapore and Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup> In line with our effort to contribute to a comprehensive, interdisciplinary, historically based international social science, we seek to integrate the macro and the micro perspectives rather than separate them, which has been the case up until now. In essence, one of the innovative features of the NRT is, at least in our own minds, the ambition to bridge the rift between macro-regionalism and micro-regionalism. Another aspiration is to

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Robert Cox, *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Björn Hettne (Ed), *International Political Economy. Understanding Global Disorder* (Zed Books, 1995); Craig N. Murphy and Roger Tooze (Eds) *The New International Political Economy* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> William D. Coleman and Geoffrey R.D. Underhill (Eds), *Regionalism & Global Economic Integration. Europe, Asia and the Americas* (Routledge, 1998); Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell (Eds), *Regionalism in World Politics. Regional Organization and International Order* (Oxford University Press, 1995); Jaime de Melo and Arvind Panagariya (Eds), *New Dimensions in Regional Integration* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); Andrew Gamble and Anthony Payne (Eds), *Regionalism and World Order* (Macmillan, 1996); Vincent Cable and David Henderson (Eds), *Trade Blocs? The Future of Regional Integration* (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1994); Glenn Hook and Ian Kearns (Eds), *Subregionalism and World Order* (Macmillan Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Keating and John Loughlin (Eds), *The Political Economy of Regionalism* (Frank Cass, 1997); Kenichi Ohmae, *The End of the Nation State. The Rise of Regional Economies* (HarperCollins, 1995).



emphasise the reality of regionalisation behind the fetishism of formal regional organisations.

### *Social constructivism*

Social constructivism constitutes another of our meta-theoretical building blocks. It ‘provides a theoretically rich and promising way of conceptualising the interaction between material incentives, inter-subjective structures, and the identity and interests of the actors’.<sup>7</sup> Instead of focusing solely on material incentives, constructivists emphasise the importance of shared knowledge, learning, ideational forces, and normative and institutional structures. They claim that understanding intersubjective structures allows us to trace the ways in which interests and identities change over time and new forms of cooperation and community can emerge. It represents a sociological approach to systemic theory, which in turn is based on that political communities are not exogenously given but constructed by historically contingent interactions.

The relevance in this context would of course be that social constructivism draws particular attention to how regions are socially constructed. The region constitutes an open process, and can only be defined *post factum*. Regions are social constructions, and to observe and describe regionalisation is also to participate in the construction of regions. Since there are no given regions, there are no given regionalist interests either, but the interests and identities are shaped in the process of interaction and

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Hurrell, ‘Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective’ in Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell (Eds), *Regionalism in World Politics. Regional Organization and International Order* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 72.

intersubjective understanding. But no interaction is possible without some shared interests to start with.<sup>8</sup> Regionalisation is a process. The relevance of ‘hard structuralism’ is in such a situation limited. We agree with Alexander Wendt in that ‘structure has no existence or causal power apart from process.’<sup>9</sup> ‘Structuralism’ has thus to be transcended, and in order to understand structural change we must move from structure to agency, actors and strategies. In accordance with social constructivism more generally, the NRT seeks to address the fact that agency, and particularly the role of often previously excluded transnational actors, is an under-researched field in the study of regionalisation.

Similarly to neo-liberal institutionalists, social constructivists share the idea that that norms and beliefs may shape behaviour, but contrary to the former rationalist/neo-utilitarian view, actors’ interests, motives, ideas and identities are not exogenously given but socially constructed by *reflective* actors, capable of adapting to challenges imposed by the actions of others and changing contexts. From this perspective, agency is often motivated and explained by ideas, identity and learning.

### *Comparative studies*

Most studies of regionalisation have been case studies of a single region, with emphasis on those variables that the particular theoretical approach perceives as most important in

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<sup>8</sup> Steve Smith, ‘New Approaches to International Theory’, in John Baylis and Steve Smith (Eds), *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p.185.

explaining the outcome. Scholars have often tried to draw lessons from the cases, but little genuine comparative analysis has been undertaken to date (although there is now a gradual increase of comparative studies in the field).

Comparative studies have been heavily criticised from area specialists, post-modernists and others, who emphasise cultural relativism and the importance of a deep multidisciplinary knowledge of various contexts and people. Part of this critique seems to hold true, particularly the emphasis on that the comparative method is ultimately based on the same logic as the experimental method. Consequently, comparative analysis should be used with care in the social sciences. On the other hand, we believe that comparative analysis helps to guard against ethnocentric bias and culture-bound interpretations that can arise in a too contextualised specialisation. Since theory necessarily relies on some generalisations, comparative analysis is also crucial for theory-building.

We perceive a middle ground between context and area studies on the one hand and ‘hard’ social science as reflected in the use of ‘laborative’ comparisons on the other hand — i.e. what has been referred to as the ‘eclectic center’ of comparative studies.<sup>10</sup> By this combination we hope to avoid the devil of too detailed regional specialisation

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<sup>9</sup> Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics’, *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2, Spring (1992), p. 395.

<sup>10</sup> *World Politics. Special Issue: The Role of Theory in Comparative Politics. A Symposium*. Vol. 48, No 1 (October, 1995). See also *Africa Today. Special Issue: The Future of Regional Studies*. Vol. 44, No. 2 (April-June, 1997); Andrew W. Axline (Ed) *The Political Economy of Regional Cooperation. Comparative Case Studies* (Pinter Publisher, 1994); Anthony Payne, ‘The New Political Economy of Area Studies’, *Millenium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (September, 1998), pp. 253-73.

and the deep blue sea of general theory. A useful way of overcoming whatever tensions there may exist between 'globalism' and 'localism' is to focus on Comparative Regional Studies within a globalised framework; i.e. to look upon a particular region in a world of regions, together constituting an emerging world order marked by regional peculiarities.

### **Theorising regionness**

The concept of 'region' is obviously fundamental to regional analysis. The main task of identifying regions implies making judgements about the degree to which a particular area in various respects constitutes a distinct entity, which can be distinguished as a relatively coherent territorial subsystem (in contrast with non-territorial subsystems) from the rest of the global system. When different processes of regionalisation in various fields and at various levels intensify and converge within the same geographical area, the cohesiveness and thereby the distinctiveness of the region in the making increases. The NRT seeks to describe this process of regionalisation in terms of levels of 'regionness' i.e. the process whereby a geographical area is transformed from a passive object to an active subject, capable of articulating the transnational interests of the emerging region. Regionness thus implies that a region can be a region 'more or less'. The level of regionness can both increase and decrease.

Mostly when we speak of regions we actually mean regions in the making. There are no 'natural' or 'given' regions, but these are created and recreated in the process of global transformation. Regionness can be understood in analogy with concepts such as

‘stateness’ and ‘nationness’. The regionalisation process can be intentional or non-intentional, and may proceed unevenly along the various dimensions of the ‘new regionalism’ (i.e. economics, politics, culture, security etc.). In what follows we will describe five generalised levels of regionness, which can be said to define a particular region in terms of regional coherence and community.<sup>11</sup>

It is conventionally held that a region minimally refers to a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence. However, in an effort to transcend state-centrism and the fixation on regional organisations rather than the processes of regionalisation, the NRT does not view regions as simple aggregations of ‘states’, and the regional frontier may very well cut through a particular state’s territory, positioning some parts of the state within the emerging region and others outside. For instance, it could be argued that some parts of China, mainly the coastal areas, form part of an East Asian regionalisation process while mainland China does not. A less dramatic example is the well-consolidated nation-state of Sweden where, nevertheless, the eastern part turns Baltic, while the western turns Atlantic. Furthermore, what is referred to as a region with regard to economic relations may not always be a relevant delimitation seen from, for instance, a

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<sup>11</sup> Representing our effort to move towards a more coherent theoretical construct, it should be noted that the present version of regionness differs slightly compared with previous formulations made by Hettne and Hettne and Söderbaum, cf. Björn Hettne, ‘Neo-Mercantilism: The Pursuit of Regionness’, *Cooperation & Conflict* Vol. 28, No. 3 (1993), pp. 211-232; Björn Hettne, ‘Globalization and the New Regionalism: The Second Great Transformation’, in Björn Hettne, Andras Inotai and Osvaldo Sunkel (Eds), *Globalism and the New Regionalism* (Macmillan, 1999), pp. 1-25; and Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum, ‘The New Regionalism Approach’, *Politeia. Special Issue: The New Regionalism*. Vol 17, No 3 (1998), pp. 6-22.

political or a cultural perspective. Particularly at the less advanced levels of regionness and with regard to the outer boundaries, which tend to be the most blurred, it is necessary to maintain eclectic and flexible definitions of regions. It should nevertheless be clear that the regionness thesis is based on that the diverse ideas and processes tend to converge as the regionalisation process intensifies.

Given the excessive attention received in the literature, both old and new, it is important to conceive regional organisation as a second order phenomenon, compared to processes that underlie regionalisation in a particular geographical area, which should be seen as 'region in the making'. Becoming rather than being is thus what is focused upon in this context. In what follows we identify five phases in such a process of becoming.

### *Regional space*

Although the importance of geographical contiguity must not be exaggerated, the NRT is founded on the fact that (almost by definition) a functioning society cannot exist separated from territory. That is, a region is firmly rooted in territorial space: a group of people living in a geographically bounded community, controlling a certain set of natural resources, and united through a certain set of cultural values and common bonds of social order forged by history.

First of all one can therefore identify a potential region as a primarily geographical unit, delimited by more or less natural physical barriers and marked by ecological characteristics: 'Europe from the Atlantic to the Ural', North America, the Southern cone of South America, 'Africa South of Sahara', Central Asia, or 'the Indian

subcontinent'. In the earliest history of such an area, people presumably lived in small isolated communities with little contact. This first level can therefore be referred to as a 'proto-region', or a 'pre-regional zone', since there is no organised international/world society in this situation.

However, some translocal relations are bound to develop rather early. Premodern exchange systems tend to be based on symbolic kinship bonds rather than expectations associated with market behaviour. Pre-market transactions, which Karl Polanyi referred to as 'embedded', contained an important element of diplomacy and the creation of trust between isolated communities experiencing occasional 'encounters'.<sup>12</sup> In order to further regionalise, a particular territory must, necessarily, experience increasing interaction and more frequent contact between human communities, which after living as 'isolated' groupings are moving towards some kind of translocal relationship, giving rise to a regional social system or what will be called regional complex below.

### *Regional complex*

Increased social contacts and transactions between previously more isolated groups — the creation of a social system — facilitates some sort of regionness, albeit on a low level. The creation of Latin Christendom between 800 and 1200, which also implied the birth of a European identity, is a case in point.<sup>13</sup> Such early relations of interdependence

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Beacon Press, 1944).

<sup>13</sup> Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, colonization and cultural change, 950–1350* (Penguin Books, 1993).

also constitute a regional complex and indicate the real starting point for the regionalisation process.<sup>14</sup>

The emergence of a regional complex thus implies ever widening translocal relations — positive and/or negative — between human groups and influences between cultures ('little traditions'). It is reasonable to assume that regional identities may be historically deep-seated. Hence it is necessary to take a longer historical perspective than simply the nation-building period, e.g. the Westphalian era in European and international history (i.e. the establishment of a global state-system). This is of particular importance in the South where the state system is much more recent, feeble and often quite artificial. It is in many parts of the world quite likely that an erosion of nation-states will strengthen regional identity. This may happen in Europe as well.

The creation of states — state-formation and nation-building — leads to a consolidation of national territories which for a time (the Westphalian era of Europe) implies a more inward orientation, and usually means a temporary decline in the level of regionness, which has a counterpart in the postcolonial creation of states in Latin America during the 19th century and in Asia and Africa after the Second World War. The collective memory of a more widespread identity, albeit confined to a relatively small elite, dissipates. The territorial states by definition monopolise all external relations and decide who are friend or foe, which implies a discouragement of whatever regional consciousness there might be. The existing social relations in a nation-state system may very well be hostile and completely lacking in cooperation. In fact this is a defining feature of a nation-state system according to the dominant theoretical school in

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Barry Buzan's regional security complex theory. Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1991).



IR. The people of the separate 'nation-states' are not likely to have much knowledge of or mutual trust in each other, much less a shared identity. When the states relax their 'inward-orientedness' and become more open to external relations, the degree of transnational contact may increase dramatically, which may trigger a process of further regionalisation in various fields.

In security terms the region at this level is best understood as a 'conflict formation' or a 'regional (in)security complex', in which the constituent units, as far as their own security is concerned, are dependent on each other as well as on the overall stability of the regional system.<sup>15</sup> The region, just like the larger international system of which it forms part, can therefore on this level of regionness be described as 'anarchic' with territorial states as the only relevant actors. The classic case of such a regional order is 19th century Europe. At this low level of regionness, a balance of power, or some kind of 'concert', is the sole security guarantee for the states constituting the system. This is a rather primitive security mechanism. We could therefore talk of a 'primitive' region, exemplified by the Balkans today, and as far as political security is concerned (in spite of a relatively high degree of economic regionalisation) by East Asia.

Similarly to security matters, the political economy of development can be understood as 'anarchic', implying that there exists no transnational welfare mechanism which can ensure a functioning regional economic system. In Europe this is the legacy of the mercantilism associated with nation-building, which in the Third World has its counterpart in the dependency/economic nationalism syndrome. The patterns of

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<sup>15</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

economic interdependencies tend to be exploitative rather than cooperative and mutually reinforcing, often resulting in hostile protectionism, trade wars, beggar-thy-neighbour policies, relative gain-seeking and various strategies to isolate the 'national' economies from the negative effects of the larger regional (and of course global) economic system they form part of, while at the same time trying to exploit the opportunities of the same system(s). The actors may also look towards the larger external system rather than the region. There is no shared sense of 'sitting in the same boat'. Exchanges and economic interactions are unstable, short-sighted and based on self-interest rather than expectations of economic reciprocity, social communication and mutual trust. This economic behaviour is inherent in the ideology of globalism.

### *Regional society*

This is the level where the crucial regionalisation process develops and intensifies, in the sense that a number of different actors apart from states appear on different societal levels and move towards transcendence of national space, making use of a more rule-based pattern of relations. The dynamics at this stage implies the emergence of a variety of processes of communication and interaction between a multitude of state and non-state actors and along several dimensions, economic as well as political and cultural, i.e. multidimensional regionalisation. This rise in intensity, scope and width of regionalisation may come about through formalised regional cooperation or more spontaneously.

In the case of more formally organised cooperation, the region is defined by the members of the regional organisation in question. In most conventional analysis this is

the only region acknowledged as such. This more organised region, which we look upon as a second order phenomenon, could be called the 'formal' or *de jure* region. In order to assess the relevance and future potential of a particular regional organisation, it should be possible to relate the 'formal region' to the 'real region', which has to be defined in terms of potentialities, *de facto* regionalisation, convergencies and through other less precise criteria.<sup>16</sup>

This level of regionness can be referred to as a regional form of 'international society' of cooperating states, as used in the English School, but (and this is the major difference) not confined simply to state relations.<sup>17</sup> With lower degrees of regionness, the regional dynamics is often dominated by a state-centric logic, but increasing interdependence and relaxed inward-orientation, which is typical of this level of regionness, give rise to a complex interaction between many types of actors. Here we include the wide range of 'non-state', transnational actors: markets, private business and firms, transnational corporations (TNCs), transnational business networks, NGOs, social movements and other types of social networks formed on the basis of professional, ideological, ethnic or religious ties, which contribute to the formation of a transnational regional economy and regional civil society.

It is important to recognise that the relationships and strengths of the 'formal' and the 'real' region, between state and non-state actors, differ in time and space. The crucial question is therefore to understand how the region is constructed in the interplay

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Charles Oman, *Globalisation and Regionalisation: The Challenge for Developing Countries* (OECD, 1994); James H. Mittelman, 'Rethinking the "New Regionalism" in the Context of Globalization', in Björn Hettne, Andras Inotai and Osvaldo Sunkel (Eds), *Globalism and the New Regionalism* (Macmillan, 1999), pp. 25-53.

between various types of state, market and civil society actors in various areas. Rising regionness does not mean that the so-called nation-states are becoming obsolete or disappearing, but rather that they are undergoing major restructuring in the context of regionalisation (and globalisation) and the complex interplay of state-market-society relations. It also means that they end up as semi-independent parts of larger regional political societies. The unbundling of state functions forms part of a new structure of multilevel governance where the region constitutes one level.

Various dimensions of regionalisms and regionalisations occur at different spatial levels of regions, which to a large extent are all related to one another (and therefore must be understood within the same analytical framework). Particularly important is therefore to explicitly integrate ‘micro-regions’ and micro-regionalisms into the analysis.

Micro-regionalism is related to macro-regionalism in the way that the larger regionalisation (and globalisation) processes create possibilities for smaller economically dynamic sub-national or transnational regions to get a direct access to the larger regional economic system, often bypassing the nation-state and the national capital, and sometimes even as an alternative or in opposition to the challenged state and to formal state-regionalisms.

There is a diverse pattern of micro-regions in the world today. The Euro-regions are well-known examples, which must be understood in their particular European context. As illustrated by concepts such as growth polygons, growth triangles, development corridors, spatial development initiatives and cross-border regions, most micro-regions in other parts of the world are often state-assisted with a weak degree of

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<sup>17</sup> Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics* (Macmillan, 1977).

institutionalisation while at the same time being private sector-led, market-driven, thus involving a high degree of interactions initiated by non-state actors and inter-personal transnational networks (e.g. diasporas, ethnic or family networks, religious ties, etc).<sup>18</sup>

In order to further regionalise, the great diversity of processes at various levels (i.e. macro-micro) and in various sectors must to an increasing extent become mutually reinforcing and evolve in a complementary or mutually reinforcing rather than competitive and diverging direction. The increasing and widening relationships between the formal and the real region lead to an institutionalisation of cognitive structures and a gradual deepening of mutual trust and responsiveness. Formal organisations and social institutions play a crucial role in this process leading towards community and region-building.

### *Regional community*

The fourth level of regionness refers to the process whereby the region increasingly turns into an active subject with a distinct identity, institutionalised or informal actor capability, legitimacy, and structure of decision-making, in relation with a more or less responsive regional civil society, transcending the old state borders. It implies a convergence and compatibility of ideas, organisations and processes within a particular region.

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<sup>18</sup> Morten Bøås and Helge Hveem, 'Regionalisms Compared: the African and South-East Asian experience' in Björn Hettne, Andras Inotai and Osvaldo Sunkel (Eds), *Comparing Regionalisms: Implications for Global Development* (Macmillan, forthcoming).

In security terms, to continue this line of argument, the reference is to ‘security community’, and its recent rediscovery<sup>19</sup>, which means that the level of regionness achieved makes it inconceivable to solve conflicts by violent means, between as well as within former states. With regard to development, the regional sphere is not merely reduced to a ‘market’, but there exist also regional mechanisms that can offset the polarisation effects inherent in the market and ensure social security, regional balance and welfare, with similar albeit still embryonic functions as in the old states.

A regional community is characterised by a mutually reinforcing relationship between the ‘formal’ region, defined by the community of states, and the ‘real’ region, in which a transnationalised regional civil society also has a role to play. The regional civil society may emerge spontaneously from ‘below’, but is ultimately dependent on that enduring (formal and informal) institutions and ‘regimes’ facilitate and promote security, welfare, social communication and convergence of values, norms, identities and actions throughout the region.

The micro-regions do not disappear at this stage. On the contrary, they often flourish and become a permanent feature of the larger region, thus contributing to the diversity and increasing level of cross-border relations within the macro-region. A dense pattern of micro-regions is gradually emerging, and as these become more dynamic and stronger, they also contribute to increased relations between the various micro-regions. At such high levels of regionness, the pattern of micro-regions will not have different visions than the larger macro-region, but relate to it in a mutually reinforcing manner.

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<sup>19</sup> Emmanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (Eds), *Security Communities* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

A regional collective identity has emerged and the relations are characterised by mutual trust driven by social learning. As Adler and Barnett correctly draws attention to: ‘Learning increases the knowledge that individuals in states have not just about each others’ purposes and intentions but also of each others’ interpretations of society, politics, economics, and culture; to the extent that these interpretations are increasingly shared and disseminated across national borders, the stage has been laid for the development of a regional collective identity.’<sup>20</sup>

With increasing levels of regional community, the dividing line between the separate (and often artificial) national communities within the region gradually disappears and differentiation is increasingly between those within from those outside the (macro) region. The region can in this sense be the organising basis for relationships within the region and define the relations to the rest of the world.<sup>21</sup> This implies a radical shift away from how the world has been organised in the Westphalian era. However, just like nation-states, all regions are to a certain extent ‘imagined’, subjectively defined and cognitive constructions. In order to be successful, regionalisation necessitates a certain degree of compatibility of culture, identity and fundamental values.

A shared cultural tradition — an inherent regional civil society — in a particular region is often of importance here, particularly for more informal forms of regionalisation. However, it must be remembered that culture is not given, but

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<sup>20</sup> Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, ‘A framework for the study of security communities’, in Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (Eds), *Security Communities* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 54.

continuously created and recreated. The defining element is rather the multidimensional and voluntary quality of regional interaction, and the societal characteristics indicating an emerging regional community. Some examples are the Nordic group of countries and perhaps North America (gradually including Mexico). On their way are the Southern Cone of South America and (at least the original) members of ASEAN. The established community spirit may be negatively affected by opportunistic and politically motivated inclusion of new unprepared members, such as the surprising cooptation of the Democratic Republic of Congo into SADC. In such cases the formal region is acting without regard for the real region which may in fact hamper the regionalisation process.

### *Region-state*

In the still rather hypothetical and perhaps unlikely fifth level of regionness, the processes shaping the 'formal' and 'real' region are similar, but by no means identical, to state-formation and nation-building. The ultimate outcome could be a region-state, which in terms of scope and cultural heterogeneity can be compared to the classical empires. A region-state must be distinguished from a nation-state. It will never aspire to that degree of homogeneity and sovereignty as the Westphalian type of state, and therefore a regionalised order cannot be regarded simply as Westphalianism with fewer units.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Andrew Hurrell, 'Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective' in Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell (Eds), *Regionalism in World Politics. Regional Organization and International Order* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics* (Macmillan, 1977), p. 266.



Just like there are many types of nation-states, there will also be different types of region-states. Furthermore, the political logic of regionalisation is somewhat different compared to a nation-state. Homogenisation within a region cannot (as in the nation-state) imply cultural standardisation in accordance with one specific ethnic model, but rather compatibility between differences within a pluralist culture. World regions are per definition multicultural and heterogeneous. Region-states cannot therefore be based on force, which would imply that they sooner or later explode from within, as illustrated by the Soviet empire and some large and complex African states.

In terms of political order, a region-state constitutes a voluntary evolution of a group of formerly sovereign national communities into a new form of political entity, where sovereignty is pooled for the best of all, and which is radically more democratic than other 'international' polities. National interests may prevail but do not necessarily become identical with nation-states. Moreover, authority, power and decision-making are not centralised but layered, decentralised to the local, micro-regional, national and macro-regional/supranational levels. This is basically the idea of the EU as outlined in the Maastricht Treaty. The three pillars — market integration, external security and internal security — together with the social dimension, implying a European form of more or less regulated welfare capitalism, do cover the essential functions of an organised political community. There is no doubt whatsoever that relations between these functions — theorised in the form of 'spill-over effects' in the old regionalism — sooner or later will appear as a matter of course. For other regions than Europe this may be far into the future, but should by no means be ruled out. Stranger things have happened in history. Besides, we do not suggest repetitions of a European path, simply that the decreasing nation-state capacity will give room for a multilevel governance

structure, where the regional level for historical and pragmatic reasons will play a significant role. Thus we assume that some kind of equilibrium between the levels of governance will appear before a ‘regional state’ in the stronger (‘Orwellian’) sense of the word takes shape.

### **Regionness and security communities**

Before concluding the discussion on regionness we want to point to a recent approach elaborated by Adler and Barnett in *Security Communities* (Cambridge University Press, 1998). There are some important similarities between our own effort to construct a NRT, built around the core concept of regionness, and Adler and Barnett’s three-tiered framework with: (i) precipitating conditions (change in technology, demography, economics, the environment; development of new interpretations of social reality; external threats); (ii) process variables (transactions, organisations and social learning) and structural variables (power and knowledge); and (iii) mutual trust and collective identity, which is then combined with three phases in the development of a security community — ‘nascent’, ‘ascendant’ and ‘mature’.

The differences between our two approaches should also be highlighted, which will help to further define the NRT. We are not saying that NRT is better, but simply different, and this comparison underlines what is specific about our approach.

(1) Adler and Barnett start from a system of states, whereas our idea of NRT can be applied also to historical periods that precede the state system. That is, we view the formation of regions and transnational communities in a longer historical perspective

and claim that the origins of regionness, particularly its cultural dimension, can be traced far back in history.

(2) Closely related to this, we emphasise that in certain parts of the world, for instance Africa, other types of political communities than the so-called nation-states have been the providers of security and welfare. The nation-states have thus failed, since they were artificial and often destructive entities from the outset. In fact, they have often been part of the problem of insecurity, i.e. creating the 'the Westfailure system'.<sup>23</sup> Consequently they cannot be the only units of analysis from where security and development studies takes its point of departure. Compared to the particular strand of social constructivism that Adler and Barnett are associated with, we are inclined to argue that the NRT is less state-centric, less 'formal' and more explicitly includes the agency of non-state actors and transnational forces.

(3) Whereas Adler and Barnett claim that security communities do not have to be geographically contiguous and tied to geographical space, territoriality as basis for community is basic to our approach. Even if their examples are based on regional organisations such as EU, NAFTA and ASEAN, their conception of security community is not necessarily regional in the territorial sense.

(4) Although Adler and Barnett, to some extent, fruitfully pay attention to socio-economic development, they are concerned with non-war communities and 'negative peace', whereas the NRT is founded on that security, peace, the political economy of development and culture should be integrated within the same analytical framework, thus emphasising their intrinsic relationship rather than differences.

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<sup>23</sup> Susan Strange, 'The Westfailure system', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (1999), pp. 345-354.

(5) Although Adler and Barnett certainly recognise the phenomenon, the NRT framework is more ‘global’ in nature and explicitly takes into consideration that regionalisation is taking shape within the overall context of globalisation, i.e. regions are constructed not only through the inside-out but also through the outside-in.

### **Conclusion: Towards a NRT research agenda**

The dynamics of regionalisation is still in search of theory. If we have made but a small contribution to this, we have succeeded in our effort. We have discussed some meta-theoretical postulates, the most important being that in the present world order, relevant social science theory is global social theory. The social constructivist approach was also mentioned as one theoretical building block for the construction of the NRT, bearing in mind that regions are large ‘imagined communities’. The comparative approach was seen as one important step towards theory, and a framework based on the concept of regionness was built for that purpose. In order to assess to what extent the regionness concept is capable of generating explanations of current processes of regionalisation in various contexts and cases, more focused comparative case studies are needed. It is important to bear in mind that regionalisation processes are related to globalisation processes, as noted in our discussion on global social theory, and that globalisation and regionalisation processes interact under different conditions of regionness, creating a variety of pathways of regionalisation.

In our elaboration of the rise of regionness, we argued that the *regional space* is more of a pre-regional zone. This level is nevertheless important since it draws attention

to that regions are rooted in territory. Ever-increasing social contacts and transactions between previously more isolated groups — the creation of a *regional complex* — facilitates some sort of regionness, albeit on a low and sometimes conflictual level, and indicate the real starting point of the regionalisation process. The dynamics at the next level give rise to a great variety of processes of communication, cooperation and interaction emerging on parallel tracks between a multitude of actors. This rise in intensity, scope and width of social relations along several dimensions (economic, political and cultural etc.) lead to the gradual establishment of a *regional society*, while the convergence and mutually reinforcing character of these relations reflect the emergence of a *regional community*. Finally the *region-state* indicates the rise of a new multicultural, multilayered and more dynamic political entity, which represents a step forward compared to the violent Westphalian nation-state logic, i.e. indicating what a future and probably better world order — regional multilateralism — may look like.

The five levels of regionness — regional space, regional complex, regional society, regional community and finally region-state — may express a certain evolutionary logic. However, the idea is not to suggest a stage theory, because there is nothing deterministic or inherently evolutionary about the emergence and consolidation of regionalisation. We do not anticipate a single path or detailed ‘series of stages’ that are exactly the same for all regions and that must be passed in order for higher levels of regionness to occur. Since globalisation is the main contemporary challenge, many regionalisation processes and experiments are initiated from quite different starting points in terms of regionness.

Moreover, since regions are political and social projects, devised by human actors in order to protect or transform existing structures, they may, just like nation-state

projects before them, fail. Regions can be disrupted from within and from without, by the same forces that build them up. Since a region can be constructed it can also be deconstructed, ideationally as well as materially.<sup>24</sup> Integration and disintegration go hand in hand (albeit at different levels), and at each stage there is the possibility of spill-back. Other processes such as globalisation, nation-building and fragmentation may dominate, possibly in combination with more negative forms of regional scenarios than the one outlined in this article, e.g. hostile regional ‘fortresses’ or ‘open’, neo-liberal regions serving as temporary ‘stepping-stones’ to multilateralism. Thus we do not deny a normative element in NRT.

In spite of the pluralistic and often heterogeneous nature of contemporary regionalisation and the fact that sometimes there is a decreasing level of regionness in certain parts of the world, we take seriously that after a process of regionalisation has started, it appears as if different logics begin to develop, expressing a certain evolutionary or irreversible logic. In our view, mainstream theories in the field do not adequately explain such multidimensional increase and later consolidation of the processes of regionalisation. We agree with Andrew Hurrell that ‘neo-realists may be right to stress the importance of the geo-political context in the early stages of European unity, and yet wrong in ignoring the degree to which both informal integration and successful institutionalisation altered the dynamics of European international relations

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<sup>24</sup> Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, ‘A framework for the study of security communities’, in Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (Eds), *Security Communities* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 58.

over the following forty years.<sup>25</sup> In our view, there are important gaps in the theoretical explanation of many other regionalisation processes in the world today as well, which the concept of regionness may provide insights to, for instance Southern Africa, West Africa, South America, and East and Southeast Asia. Needless to say, existing theories in the field may help us understand parts of these regionalisation processes, but it is our conviction that a more multidisciplinary and comprehensive theoretical construct is required to see beyond particular aspects, sectors and cases. A long historical perspective is needed and it is necessary to avoid the obsession with formal regional organisations.

The concept of regionness is heuristic, it constitutes a natural history of regionalisation, which makes it easier to pinpoint the specificities of real world regionalisations. Between regionness and theory there is a need for comparative research based on issues which are significant for theory-building in that they refer to the constitutive elements of each ‘natural history phase of regionalisation’.

We have thus placed emphasis on that the actors behind regionalist projects are not states only, but a large number of different types of institutions, organisations and movements and non-state actors, such as domestic firms, transnational corporations, NGOs and other types of social networks and social movements. Together they contribute to the formation of a (‘real’) transnational regional economy and civil society. It seems as if economic, social and cultural networks are developing more

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<sup>25</sup> Andrew Hurrell, ‘Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective’ in Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell (Eds), *Regionalism in World Politics. Regional Organization and International Order* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 73.

quickly than the formal political cooperation at the regional level. We therefore need detailed empirical (comparative case) studies on the strength and relationship between various types of state, market and civil society induced processes of regionalisation in the various phases of the process. Are there typical sequences (or ‘spill-overs’) in these regionalisation processes and regional convergences?

Since regionalisation is a response to specific challenges related to globalisation, the driving factor may differ depending on the specific encounter between various forces and the particular level of regionness at hand. Thus if trade agreements and market harmonisation represent the major task in one case, regional conflict resolution or ecological crisis management may be the predominant issues in others.

Regionalisation also takes place at different spatial levels. It has been argued that macro-regionalism and micro-regionalism form part of the same process of ‘new regionalism’, but we definitely need to know more about the phenomenon of micro-regionalism. To what extent does it operate according to one single logic or is it rather a heterogeneous phenomenon? A major challenge of moving the research frontier forward is therefore to analyse the relationship between macro-regionalism and micro-regionalism.

To conclude, regionalisation represents a new field of IR research where we need to know a lot more about sequences, levels, dimensions and actors.