Rethinking Regions and Regionalism

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Over the last two decades there has been a veritable explosion of research and policy discussion on regional integration and regionalism all over the world. Some of the most influential thinkers in the field emphasize that regions and regionalism are now central to global politics. For instance, Peter Katzenstein rejects the "purportedly stubborn persistence of the nation-state or the inevitable march of globalization," arguing that we are approaching a "world of regions."[1] Similarly, Amitav Acharya examines the "emerging regional architecture of world politics,"[2] whereas Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver speak about a "global order of strong regions."[3] "Regions are now everywhere across the globe and are increasingly fundamental to the functioning of all aspects of world affairs from trade to conflict management, and can even be said to now constitute world order," Rick Fawn writes.[4]

While there is a strong tendency in both policy and academia to acknowledge the importance of regions and regionalism, the approach of different academic specializations varies considerably, and regionalism/regional integration means different things to different people in different contexts. Such diversity could be productive. However,

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the prevailing diversity is a sign of both weakness and fragmentation. We are witnessing a general lack of dialogue among academic disciplines and regional specializations (European integration, Latin American, Asian, and African regionalism) as well as theoretical traditions (rationalism, institutionalism, constructivism, critical and postmodern approaches). There is also thematic fragmentation in the sense that various forms of regionalism, such as economic, security, and environmental regionalism, are only rarely related to one another. Such fragmentation undermines further generation of cumulative knowledge as well as theoretical innovation. It also leads to unproductive contestations, among both academics and policy makers, about the meaning of regionalism, its causes and effects, how it should be studied, what to compare and how, and not least, what are the costs and benefits of regionalism and regional integration.

The aforementioned divisions in the field are exacerbated by two interlocking (but largely overlooked) methodological problems: the failure to conceptualize regional space and the problem of parochialism. The purpose of this article is to try to contribute to a rethinking of these two problems in the study of regions and regionalism. Regarding the first problem, the prevailing emphasis on inter-state regional organizations is criticized in favor of a methodological perspective that acknowledges the social construction of regions by both state and non-state actors. Regarding the second problem, it is argued that Eurocentrism and parochialism are two sides of the same coin, and that comparative regionalism constitutes part of the solution.

Rethinking regional space. Historically the study of regions and regional integration has focused heavily on sovereignty transfer and political unification within inter-state regional organizations. This is seen in countless studies on the European Union (EU) and other state-led regional frameworks, such as the African Union (AU), 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). This focus on inter-state or supranational organizations stems from the fact that many scholars in the field have concentrated on determining what types of regions are the most functional, instrumental, and efficient to rule or govern. Regions have usually been taken as pre-given, defined in advance of research, and seen as particular inter-state or policy-driven frameworks.

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alism and neofunctionalism, appreciated liberal-pluralist assumptions such as the need for cordial relations between states and non-state actors to promote commerce. But these early perspectives were subordinated to the analysis of what "states" did in the pursuit of their so-called "interests" as well as the consequences of state-society relations for supranational and intergovernmental regional organizations. This preference for regional organizations continues to be dominant in the field, even if the debate is nowadays usually framed in terms of "institutional design."[5] Moreover, the policy debate is plagued by idealism about the benefits of regional organizations and more or less naïve assumptions about what they can achieve.

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This article offers an alternative, societal understanding of regional space, the way regions are socially constructed, and for what reason. From this perspective, there are no "natural" or "given" regions (or regional organizations), but these are made and unmade—intentionally or unintentionally, endogenously or exogenously—by collective human action and identity formation. In other words, regions are not structurally or exogenously given, but socially constructed by historically contingent interactions. Constructivists replace determinism with voluntarism and make room for cultural factors and the pooling or splitting of identities as determinants for action.

From this point of view, the puzzle is to understand and explain the process through which regions are coming into existence and being consolidated—their "becoming" so to speak—rather than a particular set of activities and flows within a pre-given, regional framework. In fact, regional organizations can be seen as surface phenomena produced by the underlying logic of regionalization and region-building. This does not mean that scholars should cease focusing on regional organizations and "institutional design," only that the overwhelming dominance of this focus has prevented alternative answers to how and why regions are formed and who are the region-builders.

The heavy emphasis on state and global levels in mainstream international theory leads to a weak, even superficial, conceptualization of "regional space." Therefore, when the "taken for granted" national scale/space is problematized, then other spaces and scales necessarily receive more recognition. It needs to be emphasized that the rejection of "methodological nationalism" is not equivalent to ignoring the state or national scale/space. On

the contrary, "states," "countries," and interstate organizations are crucial objects of analysis, and it is important to continue to study them, however defined. The point is that the political and institutional landscape is being fundamentally transformed and needs to be rethought in terms of more complex, multilevel political structures, in which the state is "unbundled," reorganized, and assumes different functions and where non-state actors are also contributing at various levels and scales. The methodological issue is to transcend the Western conceptions of the unitary and Westphalian state inherent in mainstream theorizing—be it neo-realist, institutionalist, or liberal theory. In doing so, the view offered here emphasizes critical assessment of state-society complexes in the formation of regions and opens up a broader understanding of what characterizes regionalism and regionalization in various parts of the world and globally.

When different processes of regionalization 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 new regionalism approach (NRA) seeks to describe this multidimensional process of regionalization in terms of levels of "regionness"[6]: the process whereby a geographical area is transformed from a passive object to an active subject, capable of articulating transnational interests. Regionness means that a region can be "more or less" a region, and the level of regionness can increase or decrease. The socially constructed nature of regions implies that they are politically contested, and there are nearly always a multitude of strategies and ideas about a particular region which merge, mingle, and clash. Furthermore, since regions are political and social projects, devised by human (state and non-state) actors in order to protect or transform existing structures, they may fail, just like other social projects. Hence, regions can be disrupted from within and without, sometimes by the same forces that build them up.

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It is relevant to illustrate how the various agencies of market, state, society, and external actors can play out in a specific regional context—namely, Southern Africa.[7] For more than a century, myriad private economic actors—such as mining houses, settlers, large and small farmers, trading companies, small scale traders, inves-

tors, capitalists, ethnic trading and business networks—have been deeply involved in the multidimensional construction of "Southern Africa." One important form of regionalization is constructed around large South African corporations and capital interests in the formal economy. Partnerships between South African corporations and governments in the region are particularly evident.

Southern Africa is simultaneously shaped through its informal economy, in which cross-border activities arise for a variety of reasons. They can be informal and petty survival strategies, organized business strategies, criminal strategies, strategies for opting out of the formal economy, or they may simply arise as a consequence of regional concentration of economic interests and geographical circumstances. Some arise for socio-cultural and historical reasons, while others are based on tax and tariff evasion.

State actors may tie into the formal and informal economies in different ways. The "project of market integration" draws attention to overlapping state-led strategies to advance African economic integration on different scales (continental, regional, and micro-regional) and ties well into the South African business expansion in the formal economy mentioned above. Many of these state-led regionalist strategies gain strength through EU support as well as support from the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), G8, and donor nations.

State actors are also involved in a variety of other regionalization strategies, driven by other motives and leading to different spatial demarcations. "Regime-boosting regionalism" draws attention to the discursive strategies of political elites in weak states who seek to strengthen a regime's official status, official sovereignty, image, and legitimacy—for example, rhetorical/symbolic regionalism where implementation of agreed policies is not the primary purpose. Regime-boosting may be a goal in itself, but it may also be closely related to "shadow regionalism," which refers to an informal mode of regional interaction, whereby public office-holders utilize their position in order to engage in informal and illegal market activities. This strategy is thus built upon a clandestine form of informal economy. Regime-boosting regionalism and shadow regionalism may be connected in that the former provides a façade behind which the latter is allowed to prosper.[8]

Finally, there exists a wide range of heterogeneous civil society activities in Southern Africa. Although civil society actors may have weak capacity compared to state and formal market actors, they still shape and influence region-building in important ways. In general, civil society is divided over how to relate to state-led regionalization projects. There is a tendency for service providers and "partners" to be favorable towards state-led regionalism whereas "resistors" and radical civil society actors are critical of the "establishment" and reject laissez-faire policies forged on principles of open regionalism and free trade. Many of these NGOs promote alternative forms of regionalism. Increasingly, the donor community tends to support a variety of regional civil society actors, further increasing the pluralism of region-

building strategies.

There is no doubt a pressing need for theoretically informed and comparative studies about the agency of state, market, and civil society actors and how these actors come together in order to construct and de-construct regions. As discussed in the next section, however, different forms of parochialism undermine the comparative study of regions and regionalism.

Rethinking parochialism. After World War II the study of regionalism, especially the early debate on "regional integration," was dominated by an empirical focus on Europe. During the era of such early regionalism, European integration theories were developed for and from the European experience and then more or less re-applied or exported around the world (even if neofunctionalists were conscious of their own Eurocentrism and performed rigorous comparisons). Too often the European Community (EC) was seen and advocated as *the* model, and other looser and informal modes of regionalism were, wherever they appeared, characterized as "weaker" or "failed," with no "regional integration" according to the dominating definition. To be fair, there are good reasons why these notions have developed, but the fundamental problem is that such generalizations continue to plague both academic and policy discussions about regionalism.

The Eurocentric bias lies in the ways that underlying assumptions and understandings about the nature of regionalism (which most often stem from a *particular* reading of European integration) condition perceptions about how regionalism does and should look in other parts of the world. Heavy emphasis is placed on the economic and political trajectory of the EC/EU. Several realist/intergovernmental and liberal/institutionalist approaches belong to this perspective, and often these theories are dominated by a concern to explain deviations from the "standard" European case. Other modes of regionalism/regional integration 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 organisation is defined in terms of EU-style institutionalisation." Indeed, as Hurrell 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."[11]

In this context it also bears mentioning that the policy debate about regionalism in the developing world is to a large extent plagued by Europe-centered beliefs and assumptions about what these regional organizations can and should achieve. As noted above, policy makers are heavily focused on supporting regional organization in Europe's image. This is seen, for instance, in that most multi-purpose regional organizations in the rest of the world follow the EC/EU's institutional design (for example, SADC, ECOWAS, AU, Mercosur, and ASEAN). But there are still no persuasive scientific arguments why other regions would or should follow the historical integration path of the EC/EU or its institutional

structure.

Whereas the mainstream literature on regionalism (especially in international relations) has favored generalizations from the case of the EU when building theories, the tendency has been the reverse in the more critical and radical literature on regional integration in the developing world. Many of these scholars and policy analysts have tried to avoid and challenge Eurocentrism, and numerous innovative attempts to develop a regional approach specifically aimed at the developing world (or particular regions) have evolved from this work.[12] These scholars and policy makers believe that regional integration is or can be tailor-made to suit specific national and regional realities and contexts. However, large parts of this scholarship (and policy) tend to mirror the Eurocentric view by taking the EU as an "anti-model" and celebrating the differences in theory and practice between regionalism in Europe and in the developing world. According to Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond, many of these scholars have even made a caricature of the EU or of classical regional integration theory—especially neofunctionalism, which is claimed to be misunderstood—which has resulted in a failure to learn from both its successes and its failures, giving rise to unnecessary fragmentation within the research field.[13] Indeed, many of the radical/critical scholars have deliberately decided not to engage with European integration theory and practice, which may be seen as "inverted Eurocentrism," perhaps even as a different form of parochialism.

The fragmentation in the study and practice of regional integration (including the failure to engage with the European case) is tightly connected to the exaggeration of regional specialization. At least empirically, most scholars specialize in a particular region, which they will often consider "special" or "unique" (parochialism), and the regional context is considered extremely important. To be fair, some of the best research in the study of regionalism is case studies or studies situated in debates within a particular region. Detailed case studies of regionalism are certainly necessary; they 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 and exaggerated regional specialization is, however, that a single case is a weak base for creating new generalizations or invalidating existing generalizations.[14] In other words, although there are exceptions, regional specialists rarely contribute to a larger comparative debate or the testing or development of general theories and frameworks. The existing fragmentation prevents scholars from recognizing that they are often dealing with similar phenomena albeit using different terminologies and conceptualizations. As a result, there is a weak *systematic* debate on the fundamentals of comparative research. Deep contestations exist regarding what to compare, how to compare, and even why to compare at all.

One of the main arguments of this article is that parochialism must be transcended and there is a need for a more integrated comparative debate

about regional integration.[15] How to manage Eurocentrism is fundamental in this regard. The view offered here is that a more advanced debate about comparative regionalism will not be reached through simply celebrating differences between European integration and regionalism in the rest of the world, but rather by going beyond *dominant interpretations* of European integration (or the n=1), and drawing more broadly upon alternative theories that draw attention to aspects of European integration that are more comparable to other regions.[16] This is only possible if the case of Europe is *integrated* within a larger discourse of comparative regionalism, built around general concepts and theories, while still showing cultural and contextual sensitivity.[17]

Although informal regionalism is not totally absent in EU studies, the intense link between formal and informal regionalism is one important contribution of both African and Asian regionalism to broader comparative integration studies. These cases show that one can, for instance, speak of relevant and truly regional dynamics and patterns that are not *per se* mirrored by formal regional efforts and projects.

The regime-boosting regionalism in Africa is often tied to, on the one hand, the supposedly specific characteristics of the African state-society complex, and to Africa's particular insertion in the global order on the other. Yet the role of procedures, symbols, "summitry," and other discursive practices of regionalism in Asia, Europe, and North and Latin America suggests a very large potential for intriguing comparison and theory development. For example, there seems to be a strong sense of regime-boosting within ASEAN, backed by the tradition of non-intervention. There is also little doubt that regime-boosting has been important historically in Europe. Here the position is quite interesting as some states have used Europe to legitimate their regimes (mirroring the African pattern) but others have used Euroskepticism for similar aims. In short, this may be a phenomenon of democracies or of a well-developed region, but regardless it may provide an interesting basis for comparison.

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As already noted, many scholars and policy makers tend to be overly optimistic about the potential of state-led regional cooperation and regional integration, and therefore fail to ask critical questions about for whom and for what purpose regional activities are

carried out. The concept of "shadow regionalism," derived from the African context, captures regional dynamics that, while keeping up universalistic appearances, mostly serve to uphold parallel and often informally institutionalized patterns of enrichment for a select group of stakeholders and their peers. However, patron-client relationships, corruption, and informal politics are certainly not unique to Africa; there is considerable scope to learn from this kind of research in order to undertake comparative research.

Conclusion. Classical regional integration in the 1950s and 1960s was often shaped in accordance with the bipolar Cold War power structure. It was primarily driven through state-led policy frameworks and usually had specific objectives and content, often resulting in a focus on free trade arrangements and regional security alliances. Contemporary regionalism from the mid-1980s has to a large extent emerged in response to globalization. In contradistinction to classical "regional integration," which primarily took shape in Europe, contemporary regionalism is a more global but also more pluralistic phenomenon. The problem is that contemporary theorizing and conceptualization often fails to acknowledge the multiplicity and fluidity of regions and tends to repeat some old mistakes, especially Eurocentrism and the tendency to treat regions as interstate regional frameworks. Fortunately, the "constructivist turn" and an increasing number of sophisticated case studies, especially of Asian and African regionalism, have spurred an interest in soft institutionalism and informal regionalism; yet regional space and regional agency are still poorly conceptualized and understood.

This article underlines that all regions are socially constructed and hence politically contested. Emphasis is placed upon how political actors perceive and interpret the idea of a region and notions of "regionness." From this perspective, there are no "natural" regions; all regions are, at least potentially, heterogeneous with unclear territorial margins. These processes look different in different regional contexts, but there is little doubt about the need to further develop comparative regionalism. The main problem is that Eurocentrism and parochialism prevent a deeper understanding of what is particular and universal in various regions around the world. Therefore, European integration theory must be integrated within a larger and more general discourse of comparative regionalism, which is built around general concepts and theories but still culturally sensitive.

NOTES

1 Peter J. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), i.

2 Amitav Acharya, "The Emerging Regional Architecture of World Politics," *World Politics* 59, no. 4 (July 2007): 629-652.

3 Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20.

4 Rick Fawn, "Regions and Their Study: Where from, What for and Where to?" *Review of International Studies* vol. 35 (2009): 5-35.

5 Amitav Acharya and Alastair Johnston, eds., *Crafting Cooperation. Regional International Institutions in Comparative Perspective* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007); Edward D. Mansfield and Helen V. Milner, eds., The Political Economy of Regionalism (New York: Colombia University Press, 1997).

6 Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum, "Theorising the Rise of Regionness," *New Political Economy* 5, no. 3 (2000): 457-74. For detailed accounts of the NRA, see Björn Hettne, Andras Inotai, and Osvaldo Sunkel, eds., Studies in the New Regionalism, Vol. I-V (New York: Macmillan/Palgrave, 1999-2001); Fredrik Söderbaum, *The Political Economy of Regionalism. The Case of Southern Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

7 See Fredrik Söderbaum, *The Political Economy of Regionalism. The Case of Southern Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

8 Also see Daniel C. Bach, ed., *Regionalisation in Africa. Integration & Disintegration* (London: James Currey, 1999).

9 For one recent attempt, see Ulrike Lorenz-Carl and Martin Rempe, eds., *Mapping Agency. Comparing Regionalisms in Africa* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013).

10 Shaun Breslin, Richard Higgott, and Ben Rosamond, "Regions in Comparative Perspective," in *New Regionalisms in the Global Political Economy*, S. Breslin and others, eds., (London: Routledge, 2002), 11.

11 Andrew Hurrell, "The Regional Dimension in International Relations Theory" in *The Global Politics of Regionalism. Theory and Practice*, Mary Farrell, Björn Hettne, and Luk Van Langenhove, eds., (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 39.

12 W. Andrew Axline, ed., *The Political Economy of Regional Cooperation. Comparative Case Studies* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1994); Daniel C. Bach, ed., *Regionalisation in Africa. Integration & Disintegration* (London: James Currey, 1999); Morten Bøås, Marianne H. Marchand, and Timothy M. Shaw, eds., *The Political Economy of Regions and Regionalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

13 Alex Warleigh and Ben Rosamond, "Comparative Regional Integration: Towards a Research Agenda" (Description of Workshop for the ECPR Joint Sessions, Nicosia, Cyprus, 25-30 April 2006).

14 Andrew W. Axline, "Comparative Case Studies of Regional Cooperation among Developing Countries," in *The Political Economy of Regional Cooperation. Comparative Case Studies*, Andrew W. Axline, ed., (London: Pinter Publishers, 1994), 15.

15 Fredrik Söderbaum, "Comparative Regionalism," in *SAGE Handbook of Comparative Politics*, Todd Landman and Neil Robinson, eds., (London: Sage Books, 2009).

16 Alex Warleigh-Lack and Ben Rosamond, "Across the EU Studies–New Regionalism Frontier: Invitation to a Dialogue," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 48, no. 4 (2010): 993-1013.

17 For some recent attempts of non-Eurocentric comparative regionalism that still includes Europe, see Alex Warleigh-Lack, Nick Robinson, and Ben Rosamond, eds., *New Regionalism and the European Union. Dialogues, Comparisons and New Research Directions* (London: Routledge, 2010); Timothy M. Shaw, J. Andrew Grant, and Scarliett Cornelissen, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Regionalisms* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011); David Armstrong and others, eds., *Civil Society and International Governance. The role of non-state actors in global and regional regulatory frameworks* (London: Routledge).