

United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30

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Juliana Peixoto Batista *Editors*

Essays on Global Regionalism I

The Past, Present and Future
of Regionalism Studies

@25
25TH ANNIVERSARY
UNU-CRIS 2025

OPEN ACCESS

 Springer

United Nations University Series on Regionalism

Volume 30

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The Past, Present and Future of Regionalism
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ISSN 2214-9848 ISSN 2214-9856 (electronic)
United Nations University Series on Regionalism
ISBN 978-3-032-13641-1 ISBN 978-3-032-13642-8 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8>

This work was supported by UNU-CRIS.

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

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Acknowledgements

The editors are grateful to Apra Jain, and also Pascale Vantorre and Andrew Dunn, all at UNU-CRIS, for their roles in editing and formatting the manuscripts and in the management of the book project.

We are also thankful to Shinjini Chatterjee, Alexander James and the staff at Springer Nature.

We are grateful to UNU-CRIS and several institutions for their sponsorship, as well as individuals who used their personal research funds to make this project open access.¹

Finally, this ambitious book project would obviously not have been possible without the enthusiastic response and generous contribution of the impressive group of scholars from all over the world.

The editors

¹ Sponsors include: UNU-CRIS, Climate Rights & Justice International, UNILA, Leiden University, Leipzig University, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), KU Leuven, German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Universidad de Chile, University of Tübingen, Maribel Aponte-Garcia, Ivo Ganchev, Konstantinos D. Magliveras, Andrea Ribeiro Hoffmann/Brazilian National Research Council (CNPq), Mohor Chakraborty and Tridib Chakraborti, Max Hernandez Chaname, Rachel Joseph, Andrea Paganini, Centro de Investigação em Ciência Política (CICP), Universidad Autónoma de Occidente, Kautilya School of Public Policy, Eurasian Development Bank (EDB), and Indiana University (IU).

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Essay 1: Introduction to *Essays on Global Regionalism (Vol. I)*—Past, Present, and Future of Regionalism Studies



Amitav Acharya, Philippe De Lombaerde, Beatrix Futák-Campbell,
Lynda Chinenye Iroulo, and Juliana Peixoto Batista

This volume is the first of an ambitious two-volume book project on *Global Regionalism*. The project consists of a collection of around 100 essays examining the past, present, and future of regionalism studies, as well as the continued relevance of regional governance. It is presented on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS) and counts on the collaboration of a diverse group of authors from all over the world, both established senior and upcoming junior scholars. The central question driving the book project is about the need and feasibility of *globalising* regionalism studies, and echoes the debates on *global IR*, in turn echoing similar debates in the wider social sciences. In various parts of the two volumes, contributors explore the diverse origins of regionalism thinking, examine the continued relevance (or not) of mainstream theories, imagine and propose building blocks for a *global regionalism* discipline, and assess the continued relevance of regions and

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_1

regional governance in today's and tomorrow's world. The contributors present their ideas in the form of short essays or think pieces.

A Brief History of an Idea

The literature—both academic and policy—on regionalism is vast and growing. Indeed, scholarly writings on regionalism—which first emerged in the 1950s if not earlier—are perhaps one of the most extensive and developed subfields of IR. Moreover, the field has undergone important conceptual shifts (see e.g. De Lombaerde & Söderbaum, 2013a). While the early literature was heavily Eurocentric, in the sense that its theories, often collectively known as *regional integration theories*, drew mainly upon Western European and transatlantic interactions, the field has slowly but discernibly broadened with the addition of newer frameworks that are variously labelled as *New Regionalism* and *Comparative Regionalism*. Yet, as this two-volume publication shows, important gaps still remain in how we study regionalism broadly defined—what constitutes a region, regional interdependence, institutions, and identities, among others. The literature on regionalism is yet to capture fully the range of phenomena that occur within and between regions on a global scale, especially in light of a fast-changing world order. This project—which develops the concept of Global Regionalism—hopes to make a contribution to advancing the literature on regionalism and addressing this gap.

The project of Global Regionalism responds to a major and persistent contradiction in the study of regionalism, which is that while the practice of regionalism has been *global* from its inception, the theoretical literature on regionalism has until now been rather parochial or EU-centric. This disjuncture between theory and reality needs elaboration. Admittedly, some of the early ideas and institutions of regionalism were developed in Europe, a prominent example being the Concert of Europe after 1814–1815, or when looking ideationally, early ideas of unified Christendom. Even the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 was and remained essentially a regional arrangement, before it *went global* as a result of decolonisation from European imperial rule, first in Latin America and then in the rest of the world from the mid-twentieth century. Equally impressive, however, are the different types of regionalism that emerged outside Europe, in the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial worlds. Pre-colonial civilisations often engaged in regional interactions and influence, as well as *de facto* regionalism, in the form of imperiums or otherwise. In colonial times, regional administrative structures were often imposed by imperial powers. In post-colonial times, ideas and movements emerged that sought to transcend these artificial boundaries and unite people based on shared cultural, linguistic, and historical ties, such as

pan-Americanism,¹ pan-Africanism,² pan-Arabism,³ pan-Slavism,⁴ pan-Asianism (O’Loughlin & van der Wusten, 1990) and, more recently, pan-Turkism. These ideological movements would later underpin the creation of formal institutions, including the Pan-American Union established in 1890, the Organisation of American States (OAS) in 1948 (at the 9th International Conference of American States in Bogotá), the League of Arab States in 1945, the Asian Relations Conferences of 1947 and 1949, the Organisation of African Unity in 1963 (which became African Union in 2000), the Pan-Slavic Congress originally convened in 1848 (and precursor to the International Slavic Council in 1955), and the Young Turks movement in 1889 and the Committee of Union and Progress (both can be seen as the intellectual foundations the Organisation of Turkic States established in 2009). In South America, the establishment of sub-regional arrangements, including customs unions, was already actively discussed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. By comparison, the European Coal and Steel Community, generally regarded as the precursor to the European Union, was not established until 1951. The timeline highlights an important point: while the Western European regional institutions have often been viewed in the literature as more *advanced* or *effective*, characterised by abundant resources and greater institutionalisation, they do not represent the sole model or origin of regionalism as a phenomenon in world politics.

Despite this historical precedence, as it is well established and acknowledged now, the theorisation of regionalism—covering key issues such as how to define it, how it emerges and evolves, what constitutes its end products, and what determines effectiveness and failure—has been overwhelmingly shaped by developments in Western Europe and the North Transatlantic areas. This was epitomised in the *regional integration* theories that held sway from the late-1950s to mid-1970s period, with the publication of *Political Community in the North Atlantic Area*, a joint work of Karl Deutsch and his associates, published in 1957; and Ernst B. Haas’ single authored volume, *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces, 1950–1957*, published a year later. These two became the foundations of what would come to be known as the transactionalist and neo-functionalist approaches, two of the most

¹ Even before Pan-Americanism (which emerged in the late nineteenth century), there were movements promoting regional thought and identity in Latin America and the Caribbean as early as the early nineteenth century, such as *Antillanism* or the idea of a *Patria Grande* (Great Homeland), which played important roles in the independence struggles and decolonisation processes.

² The Pan-African movement emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a response to slavery, colonialism, and racial oppression. Thinkers like Edward Blyden, Marcus Garvey, and W.E.B. Du Bois articulated visions of African unity and self-determination that would later inspire post-independence leaders.

³ Pan-Arabism is a nationalist ideology advocating for the unity of all Arab peoples in a single political entity. Emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a response to Ottoman rule and European colonialism, Pan-Arabism sought to unite Arabs based on shared language, culture, and history as a foundation for self-determination and independence.

⁴ Pan-Slavism is a nineteenth-century political and cultural movement that advocates for the unity of all Slavic peoples, based on shared linguistic, cultural, and historical ties. Emerging as a response to German and Ottoman domination, Pan-Slavism sought to unite diverse Slavic groups—including Russians, Poles, Czechs, Serbs, and others—through cultural cooperation or political federation.

influential theories of regional integration, and in opposition to the federalist idea of European unity.

Much has been written on regional integration theories, so repetition is unwarranted here. Having said that, while neo-functionalism aspired to generate a more general theory and some scholars did attempt to study regionalism beyond Western Europe, such work remained sparse and failed to gain the same scholarly attention or legitimacy bestowed on Western-centric studies. Moreover, these limited efforts typically focused on explaining the perceived limitations and failures of global forms of regionalism by applying criteria and analytical frameworks derived from Western European and North Atlantic experiences.

Partial exceptions existed, for example, Joseph S. Nye's *Peace in Parts: Integration and Conflict in Regional Organisation*, published in 1971. Significantly, rather than applying neo-functionalism or transactionalism—the two dominant strands of regional integration theory—to study non-European regional organisations, Nye developed his own approach, *regionalist doctrines of peace*. This framework drew on broader ideas and approaches to regional cooperation that had emerged earlier, especially during the debate over regionalism versus universalism during and after the drafting of the UN Charter in 1945. In this debate, regionalism was viewed by advocates as an essential foundation or *stepping stone* of the UN's global mandate in peace, a view opposed by those who preferred a single universal system of collective security.

The dominance of European regional integration theories was challenged by the literature on *New Regionalism* in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but it did not completely disappear (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000; Söderbaum & Shaw, 2003). On the contrary, bolstered by the growing financial resources and institutional capacity of the European Community (established in 1993) and its successor, the European Union (established in 2009), the study of New Regionalism has remained dominated by scholars and institutions of Western nations, particularly EU member states, despite the global rise in regionalism scholarship. A notable development of the 2000s and 2010s period was the emergence of *Comparative Regionalism*, which self-consciously acknowledged and attempted to redress the EU-centrism of the field, but this has remained a work-in-progress (Acharya & Johnston, 2007; De Lombaerde, 2011; De Lombaerde & Söderbaum, 2013b; De Lombaerde et al., 2010; Futák-Campbell, 2021; Laursen, 2003, 2010).

It is a dynamic field though and it has been argued that over the last decade three *silent transformations* of the field have been taking place: a conceptual transformation (whereby unpacking or disaggregating regionalism has allowed for new, relevant and more diverse comparisons); a theoretical transformation (whereby more general social science theories have gained importance); and a methodological transformation (whereby new datasets have become available and more rigorous empirical methods have been used) (Lenz & Söderbaum, 2025). These authors interpret this combination of three transformations as a *mainstreaming* of Comparative Regionalism.

At the same time, Lenz and Söderbaum (2025) are conscious that there is still a way to go for Comparative Regionalism on the path to becoming Global Regionalism and that the mainstreaming of Comparative Regionalism, as they perceive it, comes at a price. Despite committing to studying the ideas and structures of regional interactions worldwide, beyond EU-centric theoretical frameworks, and acknowledging *silent transformations*, Comparative Regionalism indeed continues to face methodological constraints and tendencies toward Western theoretical templates (De Lombaerde et al., 2010; Futák-Campbell, 2021), even if EU-centrism might come in less overt forms (Lenz & Söderbaum, 2025, pp. 14–15). The scope and case selections in Comparative Regionalism (as with New Regionalism) approaches remain uneven. They tend to be weighted in favour of studies that compare European institutions with non-European ones—for example, the EU and the African Union, or the EU and ASEAN—with fewer works that compare institutions outside of Europe, for instance, between the Middle East and Asia, or Asian and African institutions. While rightfully rejecting the EU as a *model* for other regionalisms, Comparative Regionalism approaches often tend to focus more on differences than on similarities among regional groups, whether between the EU and those in other parts of the world or between non-West European institutions. Moreover, some regions have received less attention, such as the Pacific Islands, the Global East, and Central Asia. Also neglected in the available corpus of Comparative Regionalism studies are some distinctive forms of cross-border interactions that operate outside the scope of formal institutions; the wider, formal, and intergovernmental institutions still receive greater attention. These de facto ontological biases may reflect the de facto “sociological characteristics of the research field” (Lenz & Söderbaum, 2025, p. 15), in turn reflecting unequal access to academic resources. In addition, the mainstreaming of Comparative Regionalism, if it is happening, carries the risk that a price is also paid in terms of conceptual and theoretical pluralism (Lenz & Söderbaum, 2025, p. 15).

Last but not least, there is a need for Comparative Regionalism to fully engage with the question of how the varieties of regionalism across the world shape the world order, especially at a time when the established world order—the liberal international order—is rapidly unravelling.

Features of Global Regionalism

It is against this backdrop that the present volumes on Global Regionalism assume significance.

Global Regionalism is defined as a phenomenon encompassing multiple, simultaneous, and interconnected processes by which communities organise themselves into regional arrangements that operate beyond individual nation-states but below the global level. Global Regionalism transcends physical boundaries and encompasses a wide range of regional projects, organising principles, and developmental paths that have emerged across various periods, cultural contexts, and geographical regions throughout history.

Global Regionalism is not an attempt to erase earlier approaches to regionalism but to draw upon them while challenging them to be less Eurocentric and develop frameworks that recognise and reflect the varieties of regionalisms around the world, while finding commonalities and differences to realise their goals and contribute, in a normative sense, to global stability and well-being. New Regionalism—Comparative Regionalism—Global Regionalism should be seen as a continuum. In this respect, Global Regionalism is consistent with the idea of Global IR (Acharya, 2014; Acharya & Buzan, 2007), which strives to make IR a more pluralistic, inclusive field by challenging Western- and Euro-centrism, while not denying space to preexisting IR theories such as post-colonialism or realism, as long as they embrace a commitment to studying IR in all its diversity and richness. In a sense, Global Regionalism is an attempt to bridge the aforementioned disjuncture between the global reality or roots of regionalism and its narrow West European-North Atlantic theoretical foundations.

Building on this foundation, it is necessary to highlight three key features of Global Regionalism.

First, Global Regionalism, which builds on the New Regionalism and Comparative Regionalism research programs and is inspired by the emerging perspective of Global International Relations (Global IR), holds that regions and their institutions are constructed through economic, political, and cultural interactions rather than being based purely on geographic, ethnic, or linguistic commonalities. Global Regionalism is not a static idea, but a dynamic one; it accepts that the definition of what constitutes a region may vary, depending on changing material linkages and ideational movements among regions. While this perspective is well-established in recent regionalism scholarship, it bears emphasising here as it represents a central assumption of the Global Regionalism project.

Second, mindful that there has been a fair amount of discussion (some of it rather repetitive) on what is *global* in IR or history, among other fields, Global Regionalism does not see the world itself as a seamless whole akin to the idea of a *global village*, but one that recognises and respects the diversity and autonomy of its constituents. Global Regionalism does not take *global* for granted as a fixed geographic or geo-cultural term, but as something that is socially constructed. The purpose of Global Regionalism is to reconcile regional autonomy with global interdependence. The units or constituent regions of Global Regionalism are neither wholly autonomous nor self-reliant, nor are their cultural, economic, and political boundaries erased beyond recognition. Rather, Global Regionalism seeks to investigate how these boundaries are formed, managed, and blurred, if not eliminated.

Third, Global Regionalism recognises that the categories *West* and *non-West* are terms of convenience, rather than fixed categories. Outside forces influence regionalism anywhere in the world, and there are a number of supposedly regional institutions in the *non-Western* world—such as ASEAN—that accept and welcome *Western* nations as significant partners, if not full-fledged members. Hence, just as Global IR rejected *essentialising* West and non-West from the very outset (Acharya, 2014), notwithstanding recent debates over a possible *essentialism trap* (Barnett & Zarakol, 2023; Eun et al., 2025, pp. 6–7), Global Regionalism seeks to subvert this divide,

while not forgetting the distinctive cultural or colonial identities of many nations and regionalisms around the world. Neither does Global Regionalism accept any innate, fixed, or unchanging qualities in regionalist ideas and interactions.

In short, Global Regionalism refers to (the study of) the interactions within and among regions, driven by material (economic, strategic) and ideational (political, ideological, and cultural) linkages within and between them, with a view to reconciling regional autonomy with global interconnectedness.

A Toolkit for Advancing Global Regionalism Research

Hopefully, this discussion will revive research proposals already made by scholars and push the Global Regionalism agenda beyond this volume (Blaney & Tickner, 2017; Futák-Campbell, 2021; Iroulo & Lenz, 2022; Lenz & Söderbaum, 2025). Global Regionalism offers a comprehensive and necessarily eclectic analytical framework that recognises the inherent plurality of regional arrangements worldwide. This approach acknowledges that numerous forms of regionalism operate simultaneously across different contexts, each emerging from distinct origins, purposes, and organisational logics, and has historically done so. Rather than treating regionalism as variations of a single phenomenon, these volumes position all regional projects—from the Concert of Europe to Pan-Africanism to arrangements like ASEAN—as equally valid expressions of human organisation.

The framework challenges hierarchical approaches that rank regionalisms by institutional sophistication or economic integration levels, while at the same time recognising that some instances of regionalism have a greater impact on the lives of citizens than others and that typologies can serve specific analytical purposes. Pan-Arabism, pan-Slavism, and pan-Turkism's emphasis on cultural unity represents a different regional logic than the EU's supranational institutions, not a less advanced one. Similarly, the concept of autonomy—as one of the deepest and most meaningful aspects of self-determination—and its role in building regional integration and a legal approach to multilateralism in Latin America reflects dissatisfaction with the *status quo* and a search for opportunities to reshape existing rules and reduce external pressures (Deciancio & Tussie, 2020), rather than representing a less committed version of regionalism or regional thought. This non-hierarchical perspective enables researchers to analyse diverse regional projects on their own terms rather than against a single normative standard.

Historical analysis within these volumes emphasises simultaneity over linear progression. While European regional ideas have deep roots, non-European projects like Pan-Americanism, Pan-Africanism, the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA), and the Arab League, among others, emerged independently, reflecting distinct regional needs rather than responses to European models. This temporal reframing reveals parallel developments that traditional approaches often obscure.

The relational dimension of actors acknowledges that regional projects coexist in a dynamic relationship with one another, characterised by competition, complementarity, and overlap (Qin, 2016). States participate in multiple regional arrangements simultaneously, while regional projects influence each other across geographical boundaries through learning, adaptation, and strategic interaction. This comparative and pluralist lens reveals how regional diversity and interconnectedness together constitute the global phenomenon of regionalism. Global Regionalism, therefore, also speaks to existing concepts such as overlapping regionalisms, policy diffusion, and interregionalism.

Global Regionalism, like New Regionalism, focuses on ongoing regionalisation rather than fixed institutional outcomes. These volumes propose the study of formal institutionalisation alongside informal regionalisation, identity formation, and evolving governance practices. Regions are continually created and remade through social, economic, political, and cultural interactions, necessitating dynamic rather than static analytical approaches. Functional diversity acknowledges that different regionalisms serve varied primary purposes, including economic integration, cultural preservation, security cooperation, and anti-imperial solidarity. This plurality reflects the diverse contexts and needs that generate regional projects, requiring analytical flexibility rather than uniform theoretical frameworks.

Epistemologically, Global Regionalism also draws on postcolonial and decolonial theories to recognise that different regions *know* themselves through distinct concepts of space, community, and belonging. European territorial sovereignty coexists with pan-Africanism, Islamic ummah, or indigenous relationality. Postcolonial scholarship, popularised in the 1970s by scholars from formerly colonised states (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988), examined the interactions between European nations and colonised peoples, addressing the material and socio-economic factors that shaped these relationships. Decolonial scholarship extends this analysis by challenging Western-centric categorisation and theorisation in academic research (Amin, 1976; Diop, 1987; Quijano, 2000). Critical approaches, including Critical Race Theory, Third World Approaches to International Law, and Feminist Theory, investigate how power, racialised, and gendered relations are perpetuated within global structures (Crenshaw et al., 1996; Gathii, 2022; Sawyer et al., 2023).

These theoretical frameworks are essential to Global Regionalism because they reveal how colonial legacies, power imbalances, race, and gender continue to shape regional dynamics. They enable researchers to understand regional projects through locally grounded conceptual frameworks, rather than imposing external analytical models. For instance, these critical approaches illuminate how different regions have responded to crises in Ukraine, Palestine, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, among others. Moreover, they uncover how indigenous knowledge systems and non-Western forms of alternative regional arrangements challenge and transform conventional state-centric models of cooperation.

These volumes present Global Regionalism as a comprehensive study of regionalisation processes and regionalism in all its forms—plural, dynamic, and foundational to understanding contemporary international relations beyond state-centric

paradigms. It provides researchers with analytical tools to advance Comparative Regionalism while avoiding Western- and Eurocentric assumptions and embracing the full diversity of regional experiences worldwide.

Structure of This Volume

In this volume, Part I explores the diverse and worldwide origins of regionalist ideas and institutions, drawing on the histories of interactions in Europe, Asia, Eurasia, Africa, the Americas, and the Islamic world.

Part II examines the existing (including mainstream) theoretical approaches to regionalism, with a view to identifying their strengths and limitations when applied *globally* and how efforts to address the EU-centrism of these approaches have succeeded or fallen short. It also considers whether and to what extent existing theories remain relevant, where and how changes are needed and if and where they are taking place.

With Part III, on “How Global Regionalism Could/Should Look?”, the project moves to a normative question, asking and addressing what Global Regionalism as a field of study is and what it ought to be. This necessarily refers to ontologies, epistemology, and empirical methods. It also refers to the theoretical ambitions that such an enterprise should or could have, and to the issue of comparability of cases and experiences in the first place. Global Regionalism is bound to be a controversial enterprise, but what is certain is that perspectives on this question will vary depending on the location, domestic and regional circumstances, material capacities and ideational orientations of the states and societies of different regions. Despite these challenges, addressing this question is important, as these volumes are not just an attempt to describe the state of regionalisms around the world, but also to provide ideas for making them more consequential for world order.

Throughout this volume, the role of epistemic communities in broadening and deepening the study of regionalism is also considered, as well as the extent to which they are willing and able to overcome the parochialism of approaches to regionalism. It is essential to acknowledge that parochialism is not exclusive to Western or European scholars; many understandings of regionalism in different parts of the world are also parochial in the sense that they stress distinctive *ways* of approaching regionalism. Avoiding such *exceptionalism* is a major challenge for Global Regionalism as much as it has been for Global IR.

Volume II complements this one and focuses on the relevance of the regional phenomenon and regional governance in the global context in the foreseeable future.

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Part I
**What Are the Global Origins
of Regionalism Thinking?**

Essay 2: Pan-Africanism—A Theory of Regional Integration



Odair Barros Varela

In Memoriam of José Leitão da Graça, the Old Pan-Africanist

Introduction

The essay aims, in the first place, to analyse the paths of Pan-Africanism as the *Other* of Nationalism, that is, as a political and theoretical alternative to it in the anti-colonial struggle, and the implications of this *rivalry*. This analysis, situated in the field of Political Science and International Relations and based on African historiography, looks at the particular cases of Guinea-Bissau and Cabo Verde, in which the liberation movement, personified in the PAIGC, appears more internationalist and pan-Africanist than nationalist. At this point, the work briefly studies the complex reasons for the exclusion of pan-Africanist possibilities in the *decolonisation* agreements in favour of the establishment of the Eurocentric model of nation-states, which led to single-party systems, often radical, and with the support of the ideological blocs in confrontation in the context of the Cold War. In light of these historical obstacles to the affirmation of Pan-Africanism as the basis for continental regional integration, this essay seeks to show the current foundations and potential of Pan-Africanism as a theory of regional integration, taking as its inspiration the thinking of historical leaders and thinkers such as Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere, as well as more

This essay is based on the paper presented at the conference commemorating the 40th anniversary of the founding of the now defunct Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the 10th anniversary of the successor African Union (AU), held on 24 May 2014 at the Higher Institute of Legal and Social Sciences (ISCJS) in partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MIREX), the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation (MESCI), and the West African Institute (WAI).

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_2

recent African thinkers. Recovering the argument that Pan-Africanism can be the foundation for regional integration in Africa implies a renewed look at this theory, with a view to overcoming its racist bias and its domination by anti-colonial nationalism. The need to overcome this is illustrated by the dispute between the so-called *new Africanist* theorists, such as Kwame Appiah and Achille Mbembe, and the so-called *nativist* authors, who defend the intellectual heritage of leaders or theorists of anti-colonial struggles such as Aimé Césaire, Amílcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, and Samir Amin.

Pan-Africanism as a Political and Theoretical Alternative to Nationalism

Hegemonically defined as *political action*, African nationalism encompassed all political movements that fought for the independence of the colonies or sought to gain power in the future states. This cataloguing, by authors such as Coleman (1954) and Hodgkin (1957), loses sight not only of the fact that nationalism was just one of many possibilities for politics, but also of the role and importance of other anti-colonial movements, especially in the dispute for political space after independence, presenting alternative proposals that did not replicate the model forms of modern Western nation-states. The proposals or alternative movements to nationalism that stand out are Pan-Africanism and/or African federalism.¹ Political Pan-Africanism finds its maximum expression in the defence of the creation of the United States of Africa, a single Federal State of the continent inspired by the experience of the United States of America, by Kwame Nkrumah, followed by leaders such as Sekou Touré of Guinea Conakry and, more recently, by the former Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi. African federalism stipulates the creation of Federations of States (unions between States) instead of the creation of nation-states in the image of European States or former metropolises. With the exception of the case, for example, of Tanzania, which, under the leadership of Julius Nyerere, is the result of the union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar, which took place on April 26, 1964, there are several examples of unsuccessful federations in Africa, including the Mali Federation and the Senegambia Federation. The Mali Federation, formed by Senegal and Sudan, lasted only two months in 1960 before dissolving due to political differences and conflicts of interest between the two states. The Senegambia Federation, an attempt at integration between Senegal and Gambia, also ended due to differences of opinion and political tensions. This does not mean that some ideologues, for example, of Pan-Africanism, simply rejected nationalism. In the view of authors such as Amílcar

¹ As one of the political theories of regional integration, federalism explains regional integration through the creation of institutions to which states voluntarily transfer sovereignty (Gilpin, 2001). The federal process is sustained by the strength exerted by a political elite, which is often led by an important figure from the states that promote integration, as seemed to be happening with Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, in relation to the African continent. However, as we will see later, the paths followed were different.

Cabral and Leopold Sedar Senghor, it is possible to reconcile pan-Africanist and nationalist proposals.

The historian Frederick Cooper says the following about Senghor:

Renowned intellectuals, notably Leopold Senghor, approached the perspectives of Pan-Africanism, nationalism, and the desire for economic and social reform in a complex way: Senghor's *négritude* encompassed the essentialist notions of African culture, but inverted their value, erasing differences and eliminating conflicts within an idealised Africa. Senghor was equally brilliant at analysing and working with specific social structures in his own Senegal: a Christian politician with a political machine based on brotherhoods of Islam; a poet who expressed his ideas about Africa through the French language; a man who defended Africa through representations in the French legislature; a romantic defender of African settlements who, after independence, sought to use trade and aid to transform the African nation. Living through these complexities imposed pain and hardship, but there is no indication that Senghor, or many others who navigated similar currents, experienced them as destabilising in a personal sense, as an intellectual contradiction or as a threat to his sense of cultural integrity: being in-between is as comfortable a place as any. (Cooper, 2000, pp. 172–173)

Preceding nationalism, Pan-Africanism—with roots in the continent itself and in the African diaspora since the nineteenth century, mainly in the USA—became the main source of imagination in counterpoint to the territorial units that eventually became *nation states*. In the case of Guinea-Bissau and Cabo Verde, the liberation movement, personified in the PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde), was, analysing Cabral's discourse, more internationalist than nationalist. According to him, “unity and struggle” means that “our struggle,” as well as being aimed at the unity of “our people,” is aimed at African and universal unity. The struggle is therefore international and universal (Cabral, 1974, p. 31).

However, the PAIGC's stance is relatively ignored due to the predominance of studies on the liberation movements in Angola and Mozambique, namely those personified by the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) and FRELIMO (Mozambique Liberation Front), respectively. Most of these analyses were made by Anglo-Saxon scholars who were more interested in these southern African countries because of their important role in the independence struggles in former Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and British-colonised South Africa during the Cold War.

It is also unknown that the PAIGC's Pan-Africanist and internationalist stance was fundamental in consolidating the anti-colonial movements in both Angola and Mozambique. As Cabral testifies:

We ourselves, as PAIGC, worked hard for the unity of the movements in Mozambique, for the creation of FRELIMO. But we ourselves, PAIGC, helped form the MPLA in Angola. It's no vanity, no, it's publicly known, the children of Angola know it. To serve the interests of our people, comrades. We ourselves took risks in Angola at clandestine meetings. At a time when several Angolans were already imprisoned by PIDE. We had to go to Angola to hold meetings. We got a contract as an agronomist and went to Angola to meet with comrades, to discuss with them the new path we should all follow in the fight for our land. Under the control of the PIDE, comrades. And after other work we had already done in Angola. What for? To serve the people of Guinea and Cabo Verde, comrades. We didn't have the mania to serve the people of Angola, because the sons of Angola themselves serve the people of

Angola well, although in our conscience as men, it was as much for us to serve in Angola as it was to serve in Mozambique as it was to serve in Guinea or Cape Verde. And only those who are capable of serving in any land, fighting the same enemy, are truly conscious members of our Party. We have always strongly defended the need for unity between us, the movements of the Portuguese colonies. (Cabral, 1979, p. 26)

According to the English historian Eric Hobsbawm (2004), the internationalism of the African liberation movements was influenced by the spread of socialist-Marxist rhetoric against the imperialism of the colonising countries. It can therefore be inferred that the internationalist character of Pan-Africanism received strong impulses from the *socialist international*.

However, the reasons for the exclusion of pan-Africanist possibilities in the *decolonisation* agreements are complex, although the action of the former colonial powers, particularly France, was decisive.

In 1946, after the Second World War, in Bamako, the current capital of Mali (which at the time was still part of Sudan), the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain*/The African Democratic Rally, known as the RDA, was created, a movement that initially emerged under the banner of Pan-Africanism, aiming, for example, for the independence of the territories of *French West Africa* (AOF) and *French Equatorial Africa* (AEF) “within the framework of this whole and not by territories,” forming a federation. However, this ambition was met not only with resistance from the former coloniser, France, but also from the organisation’s leader, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the first president of Côte d’Ivoire, who was extremely hostile to the idea of African federalism.

But this rejection comes as no surprise given that it was an import of the vision that France had for these territories in a scenario of formal independence. No longer the basis of French administration and the mobilisation of trade unions and political parties, the regional federation was replaced by a programme of *territorialisation*, and the partial devolution of power to the individual colonies provoked the interest of African political elites in former *French Africa* in territorial institutions. As you can see, the idea of federation did not succeed here, thus inaugurating the process that would legitimise the borders artificially drawn at the Berlin conference in 1885.

At the beginning of the 1960s, when several former French colonies gained independence, disagreements between members weakened the organisation, which ceased to maintain the Pan-Africanist vision idealised by its founders (M’Bokolo, 1992). Two political-ideological trends emerged during this period: a current that identified itself as Pan-Africanist, idealised by statesmen such as Kwame Nkrumah (1963), Leopold Sedar Senghor, Ahmed Sékou Touré, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Ahmed Ben Bella, or Houari Bomedienne (Casablanca group: Ghana, Guinea-Conakry, Egypt, Mali, Morocco, Libya, and the Algerian government in exile); and the other current, labelled *neo-colonialist* by the former, was led by Félix Houphouët-Boigny and supported by Western political elites (Monrovia group: former French colonies, accompanied by Nigeria, Ethiopia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone).

According to José Leitão da Graça, the first trend, in the words of Nkrumah, aimed to see “Africa play an autonomous and active role on the international stage and, to this end, the formation of large federations co-operating with each other and evolving

towards continental unity was necessary” (Graça, 1998, pp. 106–107; Nkrumah, 1963). The second current considers, through Houphouët-Boigny’s² vision, that “Africa should continue to practise subaltern capitalism and establish inter-African cooperation with the aim of constituting only ‘common markets’” (Graça, *idem*).

In addition to the fact that the actions of former colonial powers, such as France, contributed to the failure of attempts to give a federalist or Pan-Africanist political content to the so-called African unity, this unity had serious contradictions within itself. Just a glimpse, in the 1960s, of federal or *plurinational* experiences, such as those in Nigeria, the former Zaire or Cameroon, is enough to understand why many African leaders were relatively suspicious of federalism. The fear that the *balkanisations*, or attempts at them, which affected these countries would spread to other states, and the foreseeable difficulties in reconciling the organisation of the federal-type state with the need to consolidate the unity of states and new *nations*, ended up leaving little room for the federalist or Pan-African dream, which was reduced to the creation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963.³

The idea of a continental federation was theorised, for example, by the illustrious Senegalese intellectual and politician Cheikh Anta Diop (1960) at the time of African independence. Although his work was very stimulating, it turned out to be unfruitful because his argument that the historical unity of Africa could provide the basis for a future continental federal system was not followed up on historically. Although, in our view, many of the subsequent criticisms of Diop have been decontextualised and destructive, we can only agree that the unitary concept of *Africa* that he presents is fragile and that the vision of the continent as a kind of organic entity ends up giving room for manoeuvre to a racial essentialism of the continent that, to a certain extent, has sickened Pan-Africanism until now (Appiah, 1997; Mudimbe, 1988, 1994).

On the other hand, in the wake of the secessionist *dangers* posed by federalism, some eminent leaders continued to use pan-Africanist rhetoric while internally trying to implement radical *nationalist* policies, resorting to a discourse criminalising the *enemies* of the nation and, not infrequently, to physical violence. However, compulsory attempts to establish the *national ideal* are not unique to Africa. In historical

² When Houphouët-Boigny was a member of the French government at the end of the 1950s, Frantz Fanon made the following comment: “When a colonised person like Houphouët-Boigny, oblivious to the racism of the colonists, the misery of his people, the shameless exploitation of his country, goes so far as not to take part in the liberating impulse that raises up the oppressed peoples, and in his name all the powers are given to [Marcel] Bigeard and other [Jacques] Massu, we must not hesitate to say that in this case it is treason, complicity and incitement to murder” (Fanon, 1980, p. 142).

³ Polish journalist and historian Ryszard Kapuscinski, who has travelled extensively on the African continent, paints a good picture of the enthusiasm and subsequent failure of the pan-Africanist current: “When I have some free time, I go to Africa Hall [in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia] - a large, well-decorated building situated on one of the hills on which the city extends. The first African summit was held here in May 1963. It was here that I saw Nasser, Nkrumah, Hailé Selassié, Ben Bella, Modibo Keita. They were big names at the time. In the atrium where they met then, there are now some kids playing table tennis and a woman selling leather jackets” (Kapuscinski, 2001, pp. 254–255).

terms, this is nothing new since, for example, the use of violence has always faithfully accompanied the process of modern state-building in Europe.

The work of the historian Charles Tilly (1990) highlights this process when he argues that the modern *European* state arose out of tension and competition for resources, capital, wealth, and territories, and that in most cases the coercion used to obtain them occurred through war, the use of force or the threat of it. In the words of Kalevi J. Holsti, “war as an instrument of state policy is a relatively new form of organised violence. While predation (...) and glory may be among its by-products, the main purpose of the use of force in Europe over the last 350 years has been primarily to advance and/or protect state interests” (Holsti, 1996, p. 1).

One of the greatest achievements of imperial Europe, and also one of the most devastating, was the export of this philosophy to its former colonies. These, in the period after independence, used violence as the main instrument of territorial homogenisation with the aim of building a *modern* state in the image of the West. The most serious aspect, in our opinion, is the fact that international law itself has legitimised this use of violence. The legal expert Obiora Chinedu Okafor suggests that an examination of the doctrinal attitudes that international law and international institutions have had towards the problem of the internal fragmentation (ethnic, cultural, etc.) of certain states reveals much about the nature of the law’s conception of legitimate *statehood* (Okafor, 2001, pp. 180–181).

An analysis of the combined effect of relevant international legal norms, state rules and practices, as well as a study of international political and legal literature, shows us, according to Okafor, that the attitude of international law to the question of the internal partition of established states (and also to legitimate *statehood*) has been, most of the time characterised by distinct, albeit related, stances, such as “a strict doctrine of effectiveness,” “the glorification of centralised statehood,” “the homogenisation of sub-groups” and the “domestication of sub-groups” (idem, pp. 180–181).

This doctrinal tradition influenced the attitude of the new states towards their sub-groups, and its normative influences had very negative socio-economic and political effects. It is thus clear that the governments of the newly independent states relied heavily on international law for sustained rationalisations, justifications and excuses for their coercive attempts at *nation-building*. Attempts at violent homogenisation and centralisation of the state have often had negative effects on peace and the development of the state, increasing civil wars.

In addition to the establishment of radical one-party states as a way of pursuing the *national ideal*, as in the case of Guinea-Conakry, led by Ahmed Sékou Touré, some states have adopted ideological constitutions, such as the Authenticité [authenticity] proposed by President Joseph Desiré Mobutu in the former Zaire, or socialist projects such as Ujamaa [unity or family in the KiSwahili language] in Tanzania led by Julius Kambarage Nyerere (1967, 1977), and Harambee [co-operation in KiSwahili] in Kenya under the presidency of Jomo Kenyatta.

The Roots and Theoretical Potential of Pan-Africanism

When, in 1961, Bela Balassa proposed five stages⁴ to achieve Regional Economic Integration, in Africa academic and political discussions about the desired levels of economic and political integration were already advanced and one of the protagonists was Kwame Nkrumah, who was the first president of Ghana after independence on 6 March 1957, curiously, 19 days before the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC) on 25 March 1957.

There is a consensus that European regional integration was motivated by the need for economic, social, and political recovery in the aftermath of the Second World War and the need to avoid a new military confrontation between the European powers, particularly between France and Germany. However, for Nkrumah, the creation of the EEC in this period was not just coincidental with the avalanche of independence for European colonies in Africa. In his view, the founding of this organisation, now the European Union (EU), was also aimed at safeguarding the end of European political colonialism in Africa by creating a body that would ensure the maintenance of the now *neo-colonial* link between the former metropolises and their former colonies (Asante & Chanaiwa, 2010, p. 892).

These eminent historians corroborate Nkrumah's view when they state that:

The neo-colonialism practised by the EEC consists of consolidating and maintaining the status quo that characterised the old order - the traditional structures of dependency established after the Berlin conference of 1884 and the post-colonial structures. While the Berlin Conference established colonial domination in Africa, the Treaty of Rome, which created the EEC, enshrined the advent of neo-colonialism and dependency on the continent. This is why Nkrumah, the champion of Pan-Africanism, immediately denounced the EEC, which in his eyes was a new form of "collective colonialism, more powerful and more harmful in the future than the old misfortunes we are trying to get rid of". (Asante & Chanaiwa, 2010, p. 892)

The policies of the EEC/EU through the agreements with the ACP countries (Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific), which since 2020 have formed the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACP), are criticised by these authors, focusing on the first of them, the Lomé agreements:

The Lomé agreement is not a progressive document opening the way for the establishment of beneficial and better structured relations of interdependence between Europe and Africa, but rather a new avatar of imperialism. This is why, despite the diversity of the assistance granted by Europe to the new regional groups of African states, according to Lomé I and Lomé II, it is undeniable that the relations established between Europe and Africa have considerably strengthened the latter's collective dependence on the former, through trade relations, industrial cooperation, economic development through EEC aid, and the advisory services offered by various organisations. (Asante & Chanaiwa, 2010, idem)

In fact, at the time, it was Nkrumah who led the conferences in favour of regional integration at the continental level, notably the first, the famous Conference of African

⁴ (1) Free Trade Area, (2) Customs Union, (3) Common Market, (4) Economic Union (single currency), (5) Full Economic Integration.

Peoples, held in 1958 in Accra. Virtually all the conferences advocated the elimination of customs barriers and other obstacles to trade between African states, as well as the conclusion of multilateral payment agreements with the aim of developing economic exchanges and striving for the creation of a vast common market on a continental scale.

Therefore, for some pan-Africanists like Nkrumah, the political unity of the continent must go hand in hand with economic integration through the implementation of a common market and a future economic union with a view to the rapid development of the continent.

For others, such as President Julius Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania, the way forward would be the opposite, i.e. it would be progressive regionalism that should eventually lead to continental political union under the auspices of Pan-Africanism. The need to weave or build unity is reflected in his words:

As weak as a country is, together or even in groups, we are much less weak. We have the means for multiple and reciprocal help, and everyone could benefit from this mutual support. Moreover, as a group, our relations with the rich countries are in a very different light because, while economically they may not need any of us in particular, on the other hand, they cannot sever relations with all of us. (Nyerere, apud Asante & Chanaiwa, 2010, p. 885)

In any case, the obstacles to the practical implementation of this theoretical debate on Pan-Africanism as a vector or driving force for continental regional integration lost momentum during the second half of the 1960s. Only a continental cooperation (and not integration) organisation, the OAU, was implemented, and the coup d'état suffered by Nkrumah was a major blow to Pan-Africanist aspirations and a boost for movements in favour of setting up regional and inter-state groupings with the support of the former colonial powers.

The 70s and 80s of the twentieth century were very arid for Pan-Africanism as a project seeking regional integration, but from the mid-90s it re-emerged as an important means of reducing the dependence of African countries and consolidating their position in international negotiations. Some regional and international events, such as the change in nomenclature and action from the OAU to the African Union (AU) in 2001,⁵ the strengthening of the presence of China and the other BRICs on the continent, and the recent disengagement of some former French colonies from the infamous *France Afrique* project, among others, have contributed to the resurgence of the thesis that it is increasingly necessary to look at Pan-Africanism also as a theory of African regional integration and an African theory of international relations.

⁵ The vision of transforming the African Union into a continental integration organization is a kind of revival of the vision of former champions of Pan-Africanism such as Nkrumah. Unfortunately, the steps have been timid, and it was only almost two decades after its creation that what many consider to be the first phase of economic integration (Balassa, 1961), the Free Trade Area, was implemented. In 2022, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) will come into force, a trade agreement that aims to create a free trade area on the African continent, covering goods, services and the movement of people. The main objective is to integrate the African market, promoting intra-African trade and the economic development of member countries. If this and the next steps are not implemented more quickly and effectively, the deepening of continental integration will remain a pipe dream.

Conclusion: The Role of Academia

In the African intellectual milieu, the discussion around Pan-Africanism has also been revitalised, with the highlight being the *duel* between the so-called *new Africanists* who criticise the dominant racial vision of Pan-Africanism (Appiah, 1997; Mbembe, 2001), and the so-called *nativist* authors, who defend the nationalist or pan-Africanist legacy left by intellectual leaders or theorists of anti-colonial struggles such as Césaire, Cabral, Fanon, Amin, etc. (Mafeje, 2000; Murunga, 2004; Ngugi, 2003; Nzegwu, 1996).

In our view, these two currents are not irreconcilable. As far as the nativists are concerned, we would highlight Mukoma wa Ngugi's call for the contextualisation and historical re-contextualisation of Pan-Africanism in the face of the continent's current challenges. This call aims to reposition Pan-Africanism on the path to African and human liberation, no longer just a *benign* name, a name that points without demanding, that identifies without responsibility. It was created to work towards the liberation of Africa (Ngugi, 2003, p. 88).

For this author, "to name a word, to quote something is to contextualise it, to give it its truth - to return it to its history. And so let's take Pan-Africanism, a word previously linked to racial blackness, racism, the antithesis of whiteness, African theology and spiritualism, and put it back on the track of living history... We hope to use Pan-Africanism as a name for change in Africa" (idem, p. 93).

As far as the new Africanists are concerned, Appiah (1997) mirrors the communication that can exist between these two currents by insisting that *Africa* should be defined not by some kind of racial or cultural authenticity, but by its history of struggle, in which we look at how slavery and colonisation defined Africans and how they transformed these imposed definitions into something positive. However, given that Ngugi invokes a pan-Africanism for political and strategic purposes, he distances himself somewhat from Appiah since the latter takes a stand against the general application of this usage, defending the choice between two paths for the strategic use of the signifier *Africa*: the path that must be accompanied by a recognition that Africa is devoid of defined and stable content; or the path of mobilising the signifier in such a way as to integrate it with said content.

Ngugi's analytical prescription claims the former, but his analytical diagnosis suggests the latter. His diagnosis of the contemporary situation in Africa presupposes the stability of the signifier, the existence of Africa as a singular entity subject to similarly singular forms of capitalist penetration and racial domination.

We conclude this brief analysis by citing Ngugi's book, *Conversing with "Pan-Africanism"* (2003), where he argues that it is in the very act of "conversing" with Africa that a dialogical partner is assumed, or constructed. As Senghor would say, the formula resides in the word (*la palabre*, in dialogue).

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Essay 3: Nkrumah, Somalia, and the Regional Ebb and Flow of Pan-Africanism, 1960–1966



Yusra Abdullahi

Introduction

The wave of decolonisation that swept throughout the African continent in the 1960s was characterised by both optimism and tumult. Former colonies attained independence, and newly liberated states hoped to regain territories that had historically been a part of their nation. A prominent example is the division of Somalia by the European colonisers into Italian Somaliland, British Somaliland, French Somaliland, the Northern Frontier District (NFD) in Kenya, and Ogaden in Ethiopia. Somalia's claim to the Ogaden region, a Somali-inhabited region ruled by Ethiopia, was particularly contentious. The notion to retake the Ogaden region was rooted in the *Greater Somalia* project that would unite all ethnically Somali peoples across the East and Horn of Africa (Sheik-Abdi, 1977).

Postcolonial Somalia presented a Pan-African conundrum regarding whether the principle of unity should preserve colonial-era state lines or provide the space for fragmented ethnic peoples to pursue reunification. Pan-Somali sentiments sought to redraw borders in accordance with ethnic, cultural, and linguistic continuity. Conversely, Ethiopia strongly emphasised protecting its territorial integrity, which was supported by a range of African leaders, including the Pan-African giant, Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah (*Let's Help End Border Dispute—Kwame*, 1964). The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) also played an integral role in mediating the Ogaden dispute, which was considered an African matter that necessitated an African solution. Regional organisations like the OAU held the potential to shape international affairs in a changing global order upon its establishment in 1963, both as a stabilising force and as possible conceptual cages that limited different African interpretations of regionalism, self-determination, and geopolitical norms (Murithi, 2005). In this sense, regions can foster multilateral stability by upholding

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the sanctity of borders or becoming exclusionary by foreclosing strategies to reunite dispersed people, as it did for Somalis.

After outlining a brief history of Pan-Africanism, followed by a summary of Pan-African regionalism, this essay will highlight the Pan-African tensions that were brought to the fore by the Ethio-Somali conflict. The essay seeks to examine why the Pan-African solidarity shown to the Somali Republic was limited compared to the backing the Ethiopian Empire received. The guiding question accordingly is:

To what extent did Nkrumah's intervention in the Ogaden conflict reveal competing visions of Pan-African unity, and how did this 'give-and-take' aspect of regional Pan-Africanism affect the Somali cause?

The Origins of Pan-Africanism

Pan-Africanism is an ideology rooted in the unity of individuals of African descent stemming from common histories and collective future goals. Its primary tenets advocate autonomy, integration, and self-reliance. Historically, Pan-Africanism promoted anti-colonialism and the complete liberation of Africans and the Diaspora. Today, Pan-Africanism construes the political international order as a hierarchical system embedded in racialised and neocolonial norms (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). It has frequently manifested as a cultural or sociopolitical movement that transcends the nation-state, and although its expressions have transformed over time, Pan-Africanism at its core has attempted to provide strategies to overcome external interference in African affairs and offered solutions to internal strife (Mazrui, 2005). The fluidity of the term Pan-Africanism means that its expressions are multifarious, indicating that there are as many understandings of Pan-Africanism as there are theorists of the ideology. Pan-Africanists, in their most limited political form, aspire to a single African republic in which all members of the African Diaspora might reside. More broadly, Pan-Africanism is imbued with a conviction that Black people of African heritage share many characteristics, which should be acknowledged, celebrated, and leveraged to nurture greater unity (Adi & Sherwood, 2003).

Pan-Africanist movements promote African unity in the international system, and they aspire to consolidate an all-African coalition that would empower the global African, especially as their destinies are entangled (Nkrumah, 1962). In a state-centric view of Pan-Africanism, the sovereignty of African states and the protection of their borders are considered of utmost importance, whereas a people-centric view prefers to reorganise artificially imposed borders to unite people divided by colonial partition. These dissenting views of what African self-determination looked like were informed by pragmatic and idealistic motivations (Mulugeta, 2025). Also, despite having their origins in the United States in the 1800s, Pan-Africanist philosophies continue to influence thought processes and political activities that aim to advance the interests of African states. The first Pan-Africanist leaders, including W.E.B. Du Bois, instrumentalised Pan-Africanism as a tool to resist the racial othering of Black people across the Atlantic, but it soon provided the impetus for Africans on

the continent and those in the Diaspora to connect over shared racial oppression (Sherwood, 2012).

The first Pan-African congresses were led by diasporic figures like Henry Sylvester Williams and Marcus Garvey and convened in the Anglosphere. However, the fifth Pan-African Congress that was held in Manchester in 1945 marked a turning point in the movement as leadership and conference participation shifted from predominantly African American leaders to African heads of state. Foundational principles of sovereignty and collaboration, ingrained in the movement by the likes of George Padmore and C.L.R. James, were embraced and modified by figures from the continent like Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta in the mid-1900s (Marable, 1996). The significance of the Manchester gathering has been widely lauded in scholarship on the theory and praxis of Pan-Africanism. Furthermore, it left future African presidents reinvigorated to fight for their right to self-rule. To illustrate, upon his return to the Gold Coast, Kwame Nkrumah proclaimed that the Pan-African Congress was hugely impactful and that it “advised Africans and those of African descent to organise themselves into political parties, trade unions, co-operative societies, and farmers’ organisations in support of their struggle for political freedom and economic advancement...” (Nkrumah, 1957).

Pan-African Regionalism

At the time of the founding of the Organisation of African Unity, there was a resurgence in political fervour as regional groups aimed to formalise Pan-African doctrines and consolidate them in the form of the Charter of the OAU, which was signed on May 25, 1963, in a city that would soon become a central Pan-African hub—namely, Addis Ababa in Ethiopia (Van Walraven, 1999). There were great hopes because the main goal of achieving Pan-African unification in an area that had previously been divided along colonial lines appeared to be closer than ever. The signing of the OAU Charter was attended by the leaders of 32 African states, including Milton Obote of Uganda, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Aden Abdulle Osman (fondly known as Aden Adde) of Somalia, and, logically so, one of the main architects of the dissemination of Pan-African ideals on the continent, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. The Charter emphasised doctrines built on commonality, and Article II, for example, held that the organisation would promote unity among African states and simultaneously defend their territorial integrity (African Union, 1963).

Like the term Pan-Africanism, the definition of regionalism lacks consensus. While regionalism is a formalised attempt for regions to design a regional association with the goal of strengthening sociopolitical, economic, and security integration, regionalisation comprises both official and unofficial organisations. Regional integration, in contrast, can be viewed as an ongoing process as well as the outcome of the efforts to achieve assimilation (Asante, 1997). African regionalism predates the founding of the Organisation of African Unity, and, more importantly, it predates

the imposition of European colonialism in Africa. The theory of African regionalism was already in praxis before colonisation via its far-reaching political partnerships, cultural ties, and intricate trade networks that facilitated pre-colonial kingdoms such as the Mali Empire and the Kingdom of Aksum (Alapo, 2022). Historical trading activities were often enabled by the Indian Ocean and Trans-Saharan routes that fostered transcontinental economic relationships, so, although contemporary Pan-Africanism and thereby concerted efforts in improving regionalism developed in reaction to Western expansionism, pre-colonial Africa had a long history of regionalism (Akrong, 2019).

Somali Irredentism and the Threat to Regional Pan-Africanism

Closely following Somalia's independence in 1960, Pan-Somali sentiments stirred agitations to reclaim the Ogaden region and liberate Somalis in Ethiopia from what they viewed as internal colonialism. Clashes between Somali rebels and Ethiopian armed forces occurred along the border as early as 1961 and went on for years. The violence was worsened by Ethiopia's introduction of taxes on Somali nomads in 1963, which they resisted. This instigated more rebellions supported by Somali troops (Mayall, 1978). It was not until 1964 that the First Ogaden War took place. Both Nkrumah and the OAU sought to resolve the nationalist issue over the years through protracted negotiations and the implementation of ceasefires, as well as through interactions with regional bodies like the East African Community (EAC) and the Pan-African Freedom Movement of East and Central Africa (PAFMECA) (Somalia, 1963). Nevertheless, ceasefires would frequently falter, as neither faction was ready to abandon its patriotic goals.

The OAU accepted Africa's postcolonial realities by adopting the Cairo Declaration in 1964 to address border disturbances. The declaration maintained colonial borders by reaffirming the *uti possidetis juris* principle, which necessitated African states to respect the colonial borders they inherited after independence. While the Cairo Declaration was intended to stop large-scale state revisions, it did not, in and of itself, put an end to all disunifying pursuits or ease regional friction in the Horn of Africa. It must be noted that Somalia and Morocco were the only two states that voted against the Cairo Declaration, which is clarified by the fact that both were grappling with irredentist claims against neighbouring territories at the time (*Legal Tools*, 1964).

The declaration intended to ensure Pan-African unity by disavowing the infringement of one African state in the national contours of another African state. Yet, one can argue that the exercise of state-centric Pan-Africanism that emphasised the reaffirmation of colonial borders over the protection of *all* people's rights to autonomy by enabling them to recover *stolen land* went against the very Pan-African ideals of sovereignty that it purported to uphold. In the Ogaden dispute, the OAU and

Nkrumah frequently sided with Ethiopia over Somalia due to the ingrained conviction that a stable and prosperous continent depended on robust centralised states instead of frontier modifications grounded in historical and thereby outdated assertions (“*Ethiopia, Somalia Conflict: Kwame Happy About Truce. A Call for O.A.U. Patrol Troops*,” 1964). However, Somali representatives at the OAU argued that this pragmatic stance was in direct opposition to their understanding of unity. To the regional body, which was heavily swayed by Nkrumah’s vision, both the Somali state and Somali rebels fighting in the Ogaden area disregarded the principle of *uti possidetis juris*.

Therefore, Somalis allegedly flouted the Pan-African project of standing united as a continent to counter internal fragmentation and external neocolonialism. In contrast, Somalis mostly believed that Pan-African unity should have gone beyond the recognition of arbitrarily placed frontiers and actively protected the rights of marginalised Somalis whose territory was usurped by a neighbouring foe (“*Somali Border Clash*,” 1966). Pan-Somalism determined that Ethiopian rule over the Ogaden region, which was largely inhabited by Somali people, resulted in the unfinished decolonisation of Greater Somalia. Moreover, Somali rebels and diplomatic representatives alike were under the impression in the OAU’s early days that Pan-Africanism cohered with Pan-Somalism, in that the regional body would establish a support network to assist Somalia in completing its decolonisation project (“*Report on Ogaden*,” 1965). After all, if Pan-Africanism was *truly* about promoting African self-determination, then why perpetuate Eurocentric notions of statehood and sovereignty?

Somalia and Ghana: The Illusion of Pan-African Solidarity

Aspirations of secession, separatism, or irredentism collided with the ideals of radical Pan-African figures, such as Nkrumah. The Ghanaian president envisioned a *United States of Africa* where individual self-government would be usurped by a supranational institution that would allow African states to face the disparaging forces of neocolonialism in addition to insecurities as a strong, coordinated unit (Olaosebikan, 2011).

Kwame Nkrumah was concerned about the threat newly independent Somalia posed to the territorial integrity of adjacent states. He thus became closely involved in reconciling the challenges arising from Somalia’s irredentist attempts in the 1960–1966 period, especially via the instrumentalisation of the OAU, the use of African media, and direct talks with Somali and Ethiopian statesmen (“*Osman thanks Osagyefo*,” 1961). Nkrumah deemed such actions particularly threatening in postcolonial Africa, as they jeopardised the sanctity of colonially drawn borders. Although these boundaries were imbued with artificiality, they were still widely recognised as the basis for statehood by most nation-states. Subsequently, African leaders were hesitant to validate any irredentist claims by opting to support one country’s breakaway plans rather than another country’s territorial defence due to

fear of a domino effect that would incentivise more states to follow the same trajectory. This would weaken the Pan-African project and, in parallel, produce regional instability (Gebrehiwot, 2016).

President Nkrumah's partiality towards Ethiopia and relationship with Emperor Haile Selassie are written about extensively. Their ideals diverged occasionally, and tensions prevailed about who the true Pan-African visionary was to lead the continent, yet the two statesmen still worked together on a range of issues over the years to accomplish African unity. This can notably be seen in the establishment of the OAU. Additionally, Nkrumah admired the fact that Ethiopia had never been colonised and considered this to be an example for those (formerly) colonised (Selassie, 2007). Less documented, however, are Nkrumah's ties to Somalia. After the independence of the Somali Republic on July 1, 1960, Nkrumah made sure to send his congratulations to President Aden Adde and the people of Somalia, both on realising independence and on merging with the State of Somaliland. Nkrumah declared that "Ghana greets the Government and people of the new Republic most warmly and prays that this bold step in the fight for African unity may soon be emulated by many more of us" ("*Nkrumah Greets Somali President*," 1960), to which Adde responded that "we fully and heartily agree with your desire to establish diplomatic relations at embassy level between our two countries" ("*New Somali Republic: Wise and Noble Step*," 1960).

To stimulate cooperation and deter the regional disunification of liberated states, Somali intellectuals were invited to Ghana in 1961 to advance their studies and network with Africans embroiled in Pan-African circles in the Ghanaian capital of Accra. Nkrumah's views on African solidarity were introduced to Somali men and women in person, vis-à-vis the media broadcasts that previously relayed Pan-African visions to them at home. The students benefited from the scholarships offered to them, but Nkrumah's intentions were not purely altruistic—murmurs of Ethio-Somali clashes had already arisen, and Nkrumah hoped that he could persuade the next generation of Somalis to embrace the Pan-African project and abandon nationalist endeavours ("*39 Somalis Fly in to Study*," 1961). Similarly, the Somali president was invited for a five-day state visit to meet with Nkrumah, as tensions over Ethiopia's Ogaden region were beginning to escalate and increasingly negatively impacting regional affairs. The meeting between the two leaders was widely publicised in Ghanaian media, and President Aden Abdulle Osman was heralded as someone committed to Nkrumah's ideological vision for the continent ("*Buffet Supper Held for President Osman*," 1961; "*Ghana Hails Somali Head*," 1961). Osman, and perhaps naively so, initially considered Nkrumah, a Pan-African giant whose unwavering position on self-rule and anti-colonial struggles would undoubtedly cohere with the fight of Somali rebels to regain their land ("*Osagyefo is Africa's Messiah, Says Somali Nationalist*," 1962). However, in reality, Nkrumah dabbled in what I refer to as geopolitical both-sideism, as he externally signalled Somalia's national prominence to the world while privately strategising how to best protect Ethiopia's territorial integrity for the sake of African unity (Fig. 1).

Ghanaian newspapers, such as the *Ghanaian Times*, would often emphasise Somalia's unwillingness to commit to African unity by leaving the border dispute

Fig. 1 Osman visiting Nkrumah's state house in Accra. Source "*Ghanaian Times*" (1961)¹



alone ("*Ethiopia, Somalia Conflict: Ceasefire—OAU Appeals*," 1964). Emperor Selassie capitalised on Somalia's declining regional standing among Pan-African states and framed Somalia's activities as dangerous to African security. Selassie shared that Ethiopia accepted the Nkrumah-backed OAU resolutions to accept a ceasefire, stating that "*Ethiopia has always been eager to solve the problem within the framework of the Organisation of African Unity, but Somalia has not, I repeat, not, in the past respected its obligations to the OAU Charter*" ("*Ethiopia—Somalia: Selassie (With Ceasefire Series Khartoum)*," 1964).

Ethiopia established itself as an indispensable guardian of African territorial integrity, whereas Somalia became diplomatically isolated. Somalia was further ostracised when Kenya, which had identical Somali claims to its Northern Frontier District, sided with Ethiopia. The matter even made its way to Mali, where the *All-African Women's Federation's General Secretariat* in Bamako wrote to the leaders of Ethiopia and Somalia to convey their 'serious anxiety' over the military actions along the Somali-Ethiopian border. Pressure was put on Somalia, in particular, to be pliable in accepting a peaceful resolution ("*End Border War: Say the Women*," 1964). President Nkrumah sent numerous special missions to the disputing frontiers between the early and mid-1960s. He fluctuated between being hopeful that he could settle the falling-out by stressing that Ghana was ready to undertake any action necessary to repair African unity and fearing that both parties would weaken this objective, especially if Somali rebels were unrelenting in their quest ("*Osagyefo Sends Peace Mission*," 1964).

¹ Note This picture was obtained from the George Padmore Research Library on African Affairs in Accra, Ghana, and not from the newspaper directly, as it no longer exists. A researcher's fee was paid to the Padmore Archive for the use of the material.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Pan-Somalism diverged from Pan-Africanism. While Pan-Somalism was a nationalist ideology and movement that sought to reunite dispersed Somalis, Pan-Africanism functioned as a framework that upheld the targets of the OAU Charter, even when doing so came at a great cost to some African communities. Nkrumah and the OAU, by extension, sought to shape a singular Pan-African identity with the aim that it would be embodied by Africans across the continent and beyond. Somalia's claims undermined this mission, and Ethiopia consequently leveraged the disagreement to gain support from other states in sustaining postcolonial borders (Iyob, 2001). As an ardent Pan-Africanist, Kwame Nkrumah was adamant that the OAU was the best body to arbitrate conflicts, even though he had already established diplomatic ties with Somalia. Nkrumah also personally intervened in the situation because he believed that the larger objective of African unification took precedence over regionalism, especially in relation to disputes like the Ethio-Somali case. This greatly revealed competing and contrasting visions of Pan-African unity. In the end, Nkrumah's role as an influential regional leader emboldened Ethiopia's legitimacy and undermined Somalia's irredentist activism, demonstrating that geopolitical matters are not always better negotiated by regional rather than transnational figures and entities.

The selective application of a Pan-Africanism that favoured state-centric ideals over people-centric rights highlights how the Ethiopian Empire, as a larger, influential state, was shown more solidarity at the expense of the relatively smaller Somali Republic. Pan-African unity was thus brokered in such a way that it was *given* to some states while *taken* from others. Overall, this considerably weakened the Somali struggle for unification. Furthermore, as Africa operated on the margins of international affairs, Pan-Africanism was stringently enforced to reimagine a world in which the continent would occupy a fundamental position. Regional reforms that centralised world-making to carve out more equity for Africa in a shifting global order thus took precedence over all else (Oloruntoba, 2023). Finally, Nkrumah illuminated the contradictory regional understanding of the concepts of self-determination, the lack of support for processes of unfinished decolonisation, and how regions as closed spheres of influence could put a stop to the opportunities of some nation-states while preferring the protection of others.

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Essay 4: Rethinking the Theory of Representation Through Election—Crafting an African Narrative



Donnet Rose Adhiambo Odhiambo

Introduction: International Parliamentary Institutions and Representation

International Parliamentary Institutions (IPIs) are some of the regional institutions that have mushroomed because of an increase in the number of international and regional organisations (Sabic, 2008). IPIs are generally defined as transnational bodies composed of a membership elected or nominated from member states to an international or intergovernmental organisation (Kissling, 2011; Schimmelfennig et al., 2020).¹ Like their domestic counterparts, i.e. parliaments of nation-states, IPIs are created to perform the function of legislation, representation, deliberation, oversight, and budget approval, among others (Agora Forum for Parliamentary Development, n.d.).

Alongside the argument that they are established to address legitimacy concerns, the scholarship also posits that IPIs are established to fill the democratic deficit and address the governance problems inherent in regional and international organisations (Suchman, 1995; Navarro, 2010; Plottka & Müller, 2020; Schimmelfennig et al., 2020).

Because of their legitimacy-enhancing properties, IPIs are commonly referred to as institutions of representation (Hellwig & Samuels, 2008). Representation by IPIs is made possible through acts of delegation. Literature terms the delegation that occurs at the international level as a supranational delegation. Through supranational

¹ This definition of IPIs considers two processes, either election or nomination. As will be established in later sections of this essay, the selection of members to the African IPIs is a hybrid incorporating both processes.

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delegation, international and regional organisations are considered principals, and they bestow power to IPIs who act as agents (Hawkins et al., 2006; Lindseth, 2014; Tallberg, 2002). Therefore, through supranational delegation, the IPI acts as the agent of the international or regional organisation. Perhaps it is to this end that IPIs like the European Parliament, the ECOWAS Parliament, the East African Parliament, and a host of other IPIs refer to themselves as institutions of representation.

Supranational delegation is pivotal to international organisations as it confers authority to the IPIs and authorises them to make decisions and act on the IOs' behalf (Tallberg, 2002). In a nutshell, supranational delegation exhibits delegation from the citizens to the national parliaments and from the national parliaments to the government, which then extends the act of delegation to the IO and, ultimately, to the IPI.

It is, therefore, correct to assume that parliamentary representation occurs because of a delegation from the constituent/electorate to the representative (Lupia, 2003; Lupia & McCubbins, 2000; Strøm, 2000). Supranational delegation is not any different from the delegation that occurs at the national parliamentary level. At the state level, citizens delegate to members of parliament. In this case, the states (acting as citizens) delegate to the IO. Thus, representation in parliamentary democracy is essentially a chain of delegation (Bergman et al., 2003), and it is through delegation that the role of parliaments as institutions of representation or agents of democracy remain undisputed (Cooper, 2013; Crum & Fossum, 2009; Katz & Wessels, 1999; Nijzink et al., 2006; Sprungk, 2013; Urbinati & Warren, 2008).

As mentioned before, representation and delegation are best understood using the principal agent theory. The theory argues that through voluntary bestowing of authority, an actor (agent) acts on behalf of another (principal) (Aghion & Tirole, 1997; Kiewiet & McCubbins, 1991; Lupia & McCubbins, 2000).

The principal agent theory for parliamentary delegations means the parliamentarian (including the institution of the parliament) is the agent. Through delegation, the agent conducts his/her mandate and, while doing so, allows the *principal states* (voters) to have their interests present at the table (Lupia, 2003; Strøm, 2000). This interpretation of delegation follows Pitkin's classical definition of delegation. To her, delegation is a form of "re-presentation which means making present again, in the literal sense of making present something which was nevertheless not present" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 16) and can be understood as *fictio juris* that somebody is present in a place from which he/she is materially absent. The nature of delegation described above follows the preposition that IOs are agents of states. Where governments belonging to IOs delegate competencies to the IO so that it can represent their interest. As part of the international framework, governments also establish IPIs and empower them as agents of representation (Cofelice, 2019; Schimmelfennig et al., 2020).

Representation and Elections: Eurocentric and Exclusionary

The previous section introduced the principal agent theory as a key component of supranational delegation, with the understanding that supranational delegation is delegation occurring beyond the traditional confines of the nation-state. It is a form of cooperation between states that confers authority to international bodies and authorises them to make decisions and take actions on their behalf. Supranational delegation is important to international organisations because it not only secures representation in the international arena but also helps address democratic concerns.

Political science scholarship considers delegation as being synonymous with elections and the conduct of free and fair elections as synonymous with democracy (Hayat & Rosales, 2020; Mansbridge, 2003; Plotke, 1997; Urbinati & Warren, 2008). Delegation through election ensures some degree of responsiveness by the representative to the represented for whom they act on behalf (Hellwig & Samuels, 2008; Shabad & Slomczynski, 2011). It is important to note that this essay uses the words representation and delegation interchangeably. The switch from delegation to representation and vice versa is because delegation to politicians leads to representation, and representation only occurs because of delegation. Election then takes a primal position as the primary institution that allows for delegation as well as representation (Powell, 2000).

Literature assumes that delegation and representation occur only through election. The conduct of elections is the classical example used by political and parliamentary scholarship to explain processes under the principal agent theory. During elections, the principal (voter) elects agents (MPs) to stand for and act on their behalf, safeguarding their interests and opinions (Urbinati & Warren, 2008). Through the election, the act of voting is seen as an assignment of responsibility and a tool of accountability (Arceneaux, 2006; Ashworth, 2012; Fisher & Hobolt, 2010; Hansen et al., 2022).

In a parliamentary democracy, elections help in selecting political representation. Through the conduct of elections, voters respond to the incentives and policy promises of the politicians during political campaigns, and voters decide based on the policies they most favour. Although there are complexities associated with electoral representation, such as the exclusionary character of electoral systems, varying electoral democracies, the problematic assumption that voters are heterogeneous and well-informed in making their choices to vote, among other dynamics that reduce the prospects of electoral accountability (Gargarella, 1998; Hellwig & Samuels, 2008; Pitkin, 1967; Shabad & Slomczynski, 2011), these complexities do not take away from the euphoria on the ability of elections to secure representation—and this, by extension helps the parliaments advance democracy (Beetham, 2006; Katz & Wessels, 1999; Strøm, 2000).

The supremacy of elections also finds itself in arguments on political representation. The assertion is that political representation arises and is maintained by certain procedures and standards of authorisation and accountability, and acts of looking out for another's interest, often brought about by conducting free and fair elections

(Pitkin, 1967; Rehfeld, 2006). The electoral processes of political representation, when aligned with citizens' participation, establish the basis of democracy (Hayat & Rosales, 2020). To this end, elections and political representation are at the heart of democracy (Weßels, 2007).

Political representation at the supranational level has followed this trend and assumed a bias in elections. Studies on international parliamentary institutions and how they achieve representation do not delink delegation from direct elections. By singling out elections as a tool of legitimacy (Sabic, 2008) for international parliaments, it only follows that parliamentary studies analysing modes of delegation focus on how it is achieved using elections. See, for example, the works of Strøm (2000), Muller (2015), and Downey (2021).

Generally, scholarship on IPIs and debates on representation and delegation find themselves in literature covering why they are created and empowered (Lenz et al., 2019; Rocabert et al., 2018; Schimmelfennig et al., 2020; Tallberg, 2002). The empowerment arguments concentrate on the membership of the IPIs and look at elections as a central tool of analysis. The European Parliament receives more scholarly attention within this literature, with little attention focusing on African IPIs. The focus on elections is delinked from the reality of Africa.

Little scholarly output exists on how IPIs in Africa delegate and represent their constituents without elections. Existing literature touching on African IPI describes how they were created and analyses their powers and contributions to economic integration, among others. See the works of Mumford (2018), Jancic (2019), Schimmelfennig et al. (2020), and Mumford (2021). This essay seeks to remedy this. It demonstrates that African IPIs exist as an antithesis to parliamentary democracy and the notion that election is the ultimate gateway to delegation.

Why African IPIs Do Not Elect

Currently, all three active IPIs created in Africa (PAP, EALA, ECOWAS Parliament) have aspirations to directly elect their representatives through universal suffrage. These aspirations are outlined in their founding documents as well as on their respective websites as an objective.

The choice to use nomination and election can, therefore, be considered a temporary measure to allow the IPIs to develop their selection processes without the pressure of conforming to universally accepted standards. Indeed, the ECOWAS parliament, in its treaty and rules of procedure, categorically mentions the use of nomilection as a transitional measure. The situation is similar to that of their EALA counterparts.

Although not a critical question to this essay, this author is cognizant of the fact that existing literature studying the political processes leading to African regionalisms, including the establishment of the African IPI, has tried to answer why they do not directly elect their representatives.

Densu's works, in explaining why non-democracies establish parliaments, argue that the parliaments and the membership thereof were a result of negotiations involving experts. So, the experts involved in the negotiation, in a bid to reach a consensus, not delay processes of integration, and conclude negotiations, opted to have a flexible method of selecting members, almost like a 'get this process over with' (Mumford, 2018). Schimmelfennig et al., on the other hand, argue that parliaments were originally not the institutional design of African regional organisations; as such, those at the frontline of their establishment may have focused on other interests like securing funding and appearing democratic. This analogy assumes that the election as a mode of selecting members to Parliament was not an immediate concern during the creation of the parliaments. The priority was to create and develop them later (Schimmelfennig et al., 2020).

Protagonists of diffusion argue that institutions in Africa are influenced by EU-style institutions (Börzel & Risse, 2012; Giesen, 2017; Risse, 2015). To them, African regional institutions, in mimicking the European Parliament as it was during its formative years, would opt not to elect their members, and following debates on incrementalism, gradually empower these parliaments to a point where they can directly elect their members just like the EU parliament. Despite elections, these African parliaments continue to represent without elections.

Representation Without Election

The East African Community and the Economic Community of West African States have each established a regional parliament. The EALA and the ECOWAS Parliament are IPIs recognised under the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community (Abuja Treaty). Both EALA and the ECOWAS Parliament have been imbued with the function of representation, promotion of democracy, and good governance within their respective regions.

As mentioned before, neither the EALA nor the ECOWAS parliaments elect their members. This position is not only puzzling but is also a paradox. How do these two parliaments represent without elections? And why do they do so?

Currently, both legislatures have devised a hybrid system of selection that combines nomination and election of members to their respective parliaments. Although both Parliaments do not use the word *nomilection* to define the procedure of selecting their representatives, the procedures adopted by both Parliaments, especially those under Article 52² of the EAC Treaty on the election of members to EALA and those in Article 18³ of the Supplementary Act relating to the Enhancement

² The determination of questions pertaining to whether a person is an elected member of the assembly or whether a seat to the assembly is vacant or not is solely left to the institutions of the partner states. This means that all seven partner states of the EAC have the autonomous discretion to decide who gets to sit as a country delegate at the regional assembly.

³ Stipulates that pending direct election of the ECOWAS Parliament members by universal suffrage, the national assemblies of member states shall elect the representatives among themselves.

of the Powers of the ECOWAS Parliament, confirms the existence of *nomilection* for ECOWAS and EALA.

Although other IPIs like the European Parliament and the Mercosur parliament choose their members by direct election and thus claim to represent their constituencies directly, this is not the case with the EALA and the ECOWAS Parliament.

For both parliaments, elections are nontraditional as they conduct what this essay christens as *nomilections*. *Nomilection* is a combination of the words nomination and election, and it is used to mean a hybrid process of selecting members of parliament (MP). Both nomination and election are seen to contribute in part to the selection processes of a candidate to be an MP in the regional assembly. It is a combination of both direct methods (signified by elections) and indirect methods (signified by nomination) of selection, and not either/or. The tools are intertwined such that there is no distinction between elections and nominations, taking precedence over the other. Simply put, *nomilection* employs a cocktail of divergent procedures and rules to determine the membership of the two IPIs.

The nature of *nomilection* is such that it does not exclude the classical models of direct election, nor does it leave out the indirect processes of lobbying and nomination. *Nomilection* combines both direct election and nomination in the selection of candidates. Both processes are utilised by stakeholders like political parties, national parliaments, and national governments, all of whom equally contribute to the selection of representatives to the regional assembly. For the selection of representatives at the regional assembly, *nomilection* actors have at their discretion the choice of election or nomination, and can incorporate both, as shown in Fig. 1.

Nomilection demonstrates that each parliament uses elections and nomination of candidates from their member and partner states to arrive at the respective representative and country delegate/MP to their regional assembly. It is the use of both direct and indirect methods of selection of candidates that prompts this concept. This word is relatively new and unexplored; because of this, it has earned its novelty as a tool for achieving political representation.

Figure 1 (Odhiambo, 2025) is a graphical representation of *nomilection* and how it helps arrive at the political representation of the EALA and the ECOWAS Parliament.

Figure 1 is a graphical representation of *nomilection* and how both direct and indirect methods manifest themselves during the selection of representatives for the two IPIs. The processes in the figure show how both parliaments use nominations and elections interchangeably and, in some situations, simultaneously, a phenomenon that is unique only to the African IPIs. *Nomilection* as a method is flexible and allows African IPIs to use multiple processes simultaneously. Unlike the legal basis of other IPIs, which prescribe a mandatory selection procedure, the African IPIs, using their respective legal basis, have discretion. For example, members of the European Union and Mercosur must only elect members to their respective parliaments. On the other hand, their African counterparts have the discretion to use either nomination or election or both, i.e., *nomilections*.

The unique features of *nomilections* occurring in the African IPIs, as demonstrated in Fig. 1, result in four processes of *nomilections*.

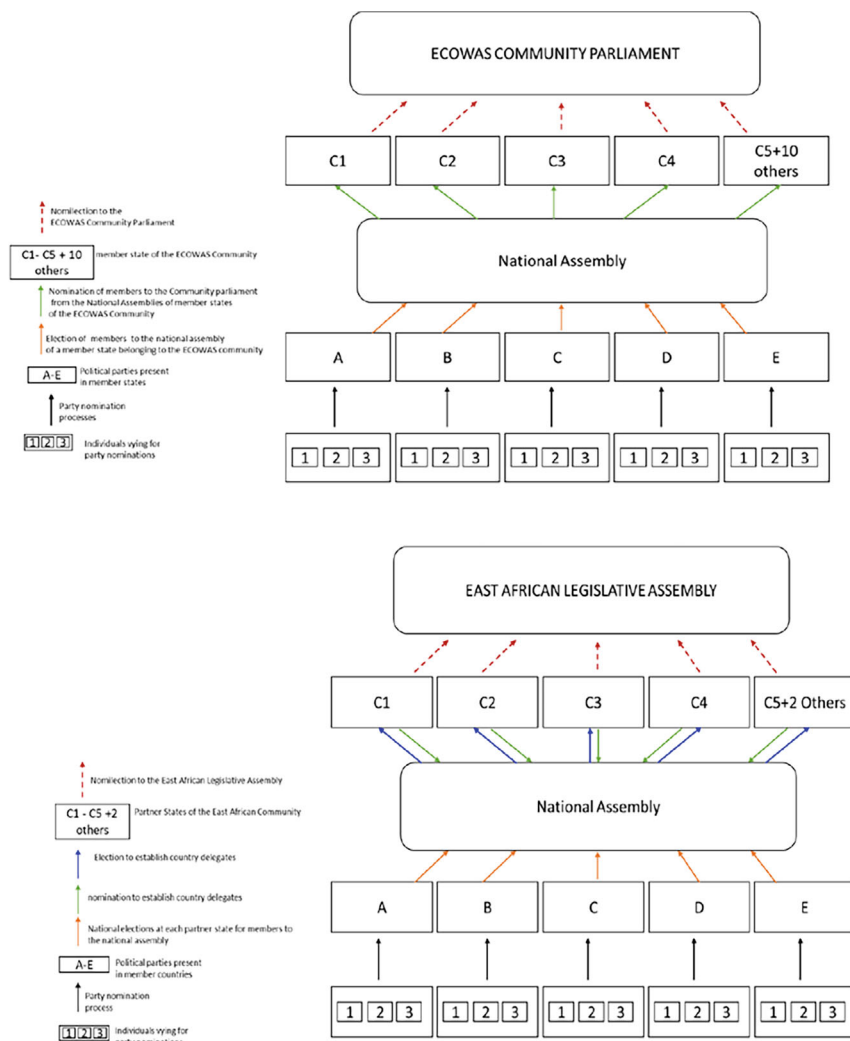


Fig. 1 Nomilection processes of both ECOWAS Parliament and EALA

Archetypes of Nomilections

1. Selection from an existing pool of candidates who have already been directly elected and are current MPs at the national level. The national parliament then nominates the elected member as a representative to the regional assembly. Here, the national election precedes nomination by the national assembly to the regional assembly.

National Election + Nomination at National Assembly

2. Selection from an existing pool of elected candidates serving as current MPs at the regional level. These candidates are subject to a second vote by their national assembly. In this instance, national elections preceded the election at the national assembly to the regional assembly.

National Election + Election at National Assembly

3. Selection from political candidates who are not members of the national assembly; they are first nominated by political parties and then subject to a vote at the national assembly, and then at the regional assembly. In this instance, nomination by political caucuses precedes elections by the national assembly to the regional assembly.

Nomination by Political Caucuses + Election at the National Assembly

4. Selection of a political candidate, not MPs, to the national assembly is directly nominated to the regional assembly. In this instance, nomination is seen as the overriding process: nomination by political parties to the national assembly, which also nominates to the regional assembly.

Nomination by Political Caucuses + Nomination at National Assembly

Nomilection and Representation

Through the processes of nomilections, representation occurs. Including both direct and indirect mechanisms allows for the presence of that which was originally and essentially not present. Nomilection processes involve an array of stakeholders, making it possible for various principals and their interests to be represented at the regional level. Through nomilections, these principals also have access to and opportunities for accountability from their agents at the IPI level. Therefore, through nomilections, states, political caucuses and even the citizenry are represented at the IPI of EALA and the ECOWAS Community Parliament.

The choice of nomilection is further befitting because of the complexities of each member and partner state to the African IPIs. The East African Community and its eight members will have all four types of archetypes in play, while the 15 members of the Economic Community of West African States will also be experiencing similar processes. Because each member of the region is selecting its representation to the IPI and employing their own archetype, the collective name that suits the processes is nomilections.

Implications of Nomilections to Representation

Nomilections allow us to rethink and expand the concept of representation beyond the vestiges of elections. Nomilection answers the question of how an institution can claim to represent without the universal method of election. It not only answers the question but also allows further discourses on parliamentary representation despite

elections. Through nomilections, African IPIs can descriptively and substantively represent their constituents.

When judged strictly using Westernised theories of representation and delegation through elections, these IPIs may not meet the cut. In fact, scholarly criticism has largely ignored them because of their lack of elections, terming them as too young to form the basis of analysis (Jancic, 2019; Schimmelfennig et al., 2020). Nomilection allows for diversity and representation of the African IPIs to be counted as institutions of representation. Nomilections legitimise the African IPIs and place them on the same footing as their counterparts, like the EP and the Mercosur parliament.

Conclusion: Rethinking Representation: A Case for Nomilection

Supranational Delegation positions IPIs as agents of their respective sending states (and/or national assemblies). Further extended, the chain of delegation lies between the states and/or the national assemblies, which act as agents of their respective citizenry. Discussions in this essay showed that literature relies on election as a tool of delegation. Elections also help achieve representation.

What this essay demonstrates is that even without an election, African IPIs can achieve representation. Using nomilection, African regional parliaments can realise representation. Nomilection is a legitimate mechanism of delegation at the African IPIs. What makes nomilections a unique phenomenon is that it only occurs within African IPIs, and their methods encourage the simultaneous and interchangeable use of direct and indirect methods of delegation to secure representation.

While scholarly literature presents only two mechanisms of delegation, either direct through election or indirect through nomination and appointment (see Cofelice, 2019), this essay's proposition is that such collective positioning does not accurately represent the African narrative. Literature on IPI and representation positions the European Parliament and Parlasur as the only IPIs that use direct methods of delegation. For the remaining IPIs, particularly African IPIs, their delegation processes, while being described as too difficult to place, ambiguous, and hard to define, are then collectively placed as involving indirect methods of delegation.

This essay argues that because EALA and the ECOWAS parliament simultaneously and interchangeably rely on both indirect and direct methods of delegation, they should not be categorised as either/or.

Nomilections manifest all properties necessary for representation. In fact, nomilections contribute to the democratic agenda of the parliaments. Establishing a link of relationships between several actors and principals creates a hierarchical relationship between the regional assembly and the national assembly, between the national assembly and the political caucuses and between the political caucuses and the citizenry, all of which are necessary for the conduct of accountability and, in effect, promotion of democracy and good governance.

Nomilection in and by itself presents a unique form of delegation that is not the typical linear method. Empirically, it varies in form, style and shape; it is, however, important to note that these differences are common to the delegation and of utmost importance is that *nomilection* meets the general features of delegation as described by Strøm (2000) and Lupia (2003). And because of *nomilection*, the political representation at the two African IPIs is realised.

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Essay 5: Regime-Boosting Regionalism



Fredrik Söderbaum

Introduction

This essay deals with regime-boosting regionalism as an empirical phenomenon and as an academic concept. In the next two sections, I present the *origins* and *logic* of regime-boosting—a concept I coined in the early 2000s to make sense of how political actors in Africa employed a variety of discursive, symbolic, and ceremonial regionalist practices to strengthen the status, legitimacy and survival of their ruling political regimes domestically and internationally. Thereafter, I discuss the *evolution* and development of the regime-boosting approach and how it has diffused to several other debates within the broader field of Comparative Regionalism. I conclude with reflections about the *future* study of regime-boosting.

Origins

In 1995, I worked as a junior researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute in Sweden, and one of my main tasks was to write a *Handbook of Regional Organisations in Africa* (Söderbaum, 1996). My work with the Handbook generated a range of questions that had received no attention in academic debates and my previous studies: Why were there several hundred regional international organisations (RIOs) and regional sub-agencies on the continent? Which of these mattered? Why was, for

I am most grateful for the extremely constructive feedback from Tobias Lenz and one of the editors on an earlier draft.

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instance, Zaire (current DRC)—under its corrupt dictator Mobutu Sese Seko Koko—a member of more regional international organisations (RIOs) than any other African country? Why did I receive almost no answers when contacting member states or RIO headquarters to confirm membership, objectives, and whether these organisations were operating or even existed?

After completing the Handbook, I became a doctoral student at the University of Gothenburg with the amazing Björn Hettne as supervisor. Around this time, the debate on regionalism was heavily dominated by Western-based and Eurocentric theories, especially functionalism, neo-functionalism, and regional economic integration theory. There was also some debate about theories of regionalism from the developing world, particularly structuralism, pan-Africanism, and what was known as the development integration model.

The rather weak results of many RIOs in Africa were usually explained by unfavourable conditions (structuralism and economic integration theory), power rivalries or competing interests (realism and intergovernmentalism), or a lack of national or regional institutional capacity to promote collective action (functionalism and institutionalism). Given the limited achievements, it appeared as a major contradiction that most scholars and policymakers continued to be overly optimistic about the real and potential benefits of regionalism on the continent.

In my view, existing theories of regionalism did not explain much, and they just triggered new questions: Were external conditions or competing interests really the main explanation for the regionalist logic in Africa? Would stronger institutions or national/regional capacities do the trick? If so, why didn't (regional or national) capacity-building and institution-building pay off in terms of outcomes? Why did rhetoric and signing treaties appear to be more important than treaty ratification or implementation of agreed policies? What if functional demands and the public goods achievement were neither the driver nor the goal of regionalism in Africa?

In my understanding, existing theories conceived regionalism in Africa too narrowly through Eurocentric, institutionalist and/or state-centric theoretical lenses that failed to understand what the logic of African regionalism was really. Even theories of regionalism originating in Africa (or the developing world more broadly) seemed to exaggerate negative structural conditions or wishfully hoped that the real purpose for why governments engaged in regionalism was to achieve public goods and cooperate to solve common problems. While existing theories of regionalism proved to be of little help in developing the regime-boosting approach, I was strongly inspired by the vivid debate about how African political actors navigated their international relations for regime survival and stability (Bach, 1999; Bøås, 2003; Clapham, 1996; Jackson, 1990).

Logic

Regime-boosting regionalism refers to a variety of discursive, symbolic and ceremonial practices used by political actors to strengthen the status, legitimacy and survival of the ruling political regime either domestically or internationally (Söderbaum, 2004a, pp. 96–103; 2016; cf. Taylor & Söderbaum, 2017). An essential component of regime-boosting is that ruling regimes and political actors in Africa often praise the goals of regionalism and RIOs and sign cooperation treaties and agreements, but have no or little interest in complying with or implementing policies. The regime-boosting approach emphasises that implementation is costly, especially in weak (non-Weberian and neo-patrimonial) states with weak or underdeveloped bureaucracies. The regime-boosting approach suggests, therefore, that ratification and implementation of agreed policies may be deliberately or strategically avoided unless it contributes to the legitimacy, sovereignty, or survival of ruling regimes. Ruling political elites may also benefit from deliberate non-implementation through a host of related activities that have to do with the nature of the state-society complex in Africa. A substantial literature from the 1990s and until today shows that informal *trans-state networks* associated with neo-patrimonial regimes gain economically as well as politically from exploiting boundary disparities and from using the coercive instruments of the state to monopolise power and deny or restrict the political rights and opportunities of other groups (Bach, 1999; Bøås, 2003; Clapham, 1996; Söderbaum, 2004a; Taylor & Söderbaum, 2017). Scholars who believe that RIOs emerge or are designed for regional problem-solving or for the implementation of jointly agreed policies have difficulty making sense of such practices.

To understand the regime-boosting logic, it is necessary to unpack the unitary state and distinguish between the state and the ruling political regime. Regime-boosting can be related to the somewhat paradoxical situation of *weak* states and *strong* or at least *stable* regimes in Africa (Bøås, 2003). In the African context, it is widely agreed that many states are *weak* and lack substantial and credible *statehood* by the criteria of international law (Jackson, 1990). Many of them also fail to meet the needs of their citizens and to ensure the provision of public goods, such as security, protection and welfare. The Zaire/DRC is an obvious example, and for many decades its government has been kleptocratic. Yet, the state system in Africa and the old colonial boundaries have, with a few exceptions, remained intact—seemingly everlasting. Thus, many weak states in Africa (even Zaire/DRC) still enjoy international recognition, and for their survival, they benefit from discursive and symbolic diplomatic practices that enable them to gain both international and domestic legitimacy and support. In his famous book *Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival*, Christopher Clapham (1996) explained how many political regimes in Africa successfully navigated the Westphalian interstate system and the institution of formal sovereignty—i.e., the maintenance of existing borders and the principle of non-intervention in domestic affairs—in a way that enhanced their ability to stay in power. Clapham and like-minded scholars emphasised that external recognition and status were important not only for external support but also for domestic support.

Although regime-boosting regionalism has some similarities with conventional types and theories of regional cooperation and integration, it is different because the main goal is regime stability instead of joint problem-solving and the achievement of collective goods (institutionalism/functionalism), broader national interest (realism/intergovernmentalism), or Africa's transformation (structuralism/pan-Africanism). For political actors and leaders, regime-boosting helps to construct an image of regime legitimacy, state-building and other norms and values that benefit ruling political elites rather than the nation-state or the citizenry in a more conventional sense. Whereas most other theories conceive of these practices as irrelevant or *failed*, the regime-boosting approach emphasises their societal and political impact, even the *success* of ruling political regimes. Another rather influential strand of conventional theory suggests that RIOs can be important in the transition and consolidation of democracy. It is claimed that domestic political elites can advance the cause of democracy "with a little help from their friends in regional organisations" (Pevehouse, 2005). Turning this argument around, the regime-boosting approach suggests that political leaders and state representatives can further their narrow political and economic regime interests *with help from their friends in regional organisations*.

Initially, I used a few concepts other than regime-boosting (Söderbaum, 2002). One early concept was the *reproduction-legitimation of the state*, which I used to emphasise processes of socialisation and the co-constitution of state and region (Söderbaum, 2002). However, this concept was too multidimensional and open-ended, so I quickly changed to *sovereignty-boosting* regionalism to emphasise how ruling political elites used sovereignty to stabilise their political regimes (Söderbaum, 2004b; Taylor & Söderbaum, 2017). Although the concept of *sovereignty-boosting regionalism* has certain strengths and has continued to be used in the debate in parallel with regime-boosting, I prefer the latter for three main reasons. First, regime-boosting is based on the distinction between the state as a collective unit and the ruling political regime. Second, even if sovereignty is essential, it is at the same time constraining, and regime-boosting can be related to a broader set of benefits for the regime, such as legitimacy, status, prestige, and economic gains. Finally, regime-boosting is easier to differentiate from intergovernmental and other state-centric theories that emphasise sovereignty without unpacking the unitary state and problematising the strategies used by ruling political actors to stabilise their political regimes.

The regime-boosting approach seeks to explain a number of important features of African regionalism that other theories have difficulty making sense of. First, ceremonial diplomacy, symbolic regionalism, and high-level summits are important elements of existing RIOs in Africa. The summits of heads of states of the main intergovernmental RIOs in Africa, such as AU, COMESA, and SADC, are gigantic and sometimes even majestic events where the political leaders can show to the world and their citizenry that they are promoting the cause of pan-Africanism and that their political regimes are *important* and *visible* on the international arena. According to the regime-boosting approach, the summits and conferences are components in discursive and imaginary constructions of RIOs, which contribute to the *reproduction*

of the state and legitimisation of the ruling regime, both domestically and internationally. This social practice is then repeated and institutionalised at a large number of ministerial meetings and other diplomatic practices.

Second, the regime-boosting approach provides an explanation for the membership expansion and the growth of new policy mandates within existing RIOs. As noted above, it helps to make sense of why dictators like Mobuto joined a significant number of RIOs in Africa with no genuine intention of contributing to their mandates unless it helped his regime to stay in power. By expanding the membership base and adding new policy sectors to existing organisations, political leaders in Africa have been able to create an image that these organisations are constantly evolving and developing regardless of their performance (Söderbaum, 2004a). Through this practice, political leaders can be perceived as promoters of the goals and values of pan-Africanism both by international and domestic audiences, which has enabled them to raise and reproduce the status and legitimacy of their political regimes without carrying the costs for translating policy into practice.

Third, regime-boosting provides a possible explanation for the creation of new RIOs that coexist with other organisations. The large number of overlapping RIOs in Africa has often been taken as an indicator of the *failure* of African regionalism or, at least, as an indication of weak political commitment by African states to regionalism. Instead of *a priori* defining overlapping RIOs as ineffective or malign, the regime-boosting approach asks why and, in whose interest, overlapping RIOs exist and why new ones are constantly being created—a type of inquiry generated from critical theory as opposed to mainstream problem-solving theory. From this perspective, the maintenance of existing and the creation of new but competing and overlapping intergovernmental RIOs may increase the possibilities for discursive and ceremonial regionalism and forum shopping.

Fourth, regime-boosting may vary across policy fields. While most of the debate has focused on political economy and trade policy, regime-boosting can also be identified in the field of peace and security. For instance, research shows that regional security interventions carried out under the banner of RIOs, such as SADC, ECOWAS, and CEMAC, may enable political leaders to help each other to increase regime stability, strengthen absolute sovereignty, and maintain the existing order, *inter alia* to curtail domestic opposition or not to disrupt economic and political relationships in the region and with the external partners (Söderbaum & Tavares, 2009). Interestingly, external powers and UN agencies have sometimes actively contributed because they have failed to understand that security interventions are sometimes designed for regime-boosting purposes instead of protecting civilians and conventional peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

It should be clear from above that the regime-boosting approach is not intended to study regionalism in its entirety. Clearly, political actors can simultaneously harbour several motivations—they can walk on more than one leg at a time, so to speak. In my own research, I have always emphasised that regime-boosting co-exists with other modes of regionalism, such as neoliberal regionalism, shadow regionalisation, as well as bottom-up regionalisation (Söderbaum, 2004a, 2004b, 2016; Taylor & Söderbaum, 2017). It follows that it is an empirical question of how much and what

aspects of reality regime-boosting explain at any given moment and in any given case (more on this below).

Finally, even if I focused on African realities when developing the approach, I have considered regime-boosting a universal phenomenon. Nevertheless, as will be discussed in the next section, it took some time until the regime-boosting approach travelled and diffused beyond Africa. In fact, the regime-building approach has also remained controversial in debates on regionalism in Africa. On a number of occasions throughout the late 1990s and 2000s, I have been fiercely accused of promoting a *false* understanding of the state and political elites in Africa and even criticised for supporting a neo-colonialist agenda. This criticism helps to explain why so few scholars of African origin used or referred to regime-boosting. Likewise, scholars normatively engaged in promoting the pan-African cause have had difficulty accepting the regime-boosting approach.

Evolution

Regime-boosting started to travel in the 2010s when it was used and developed by a new generation of scholars of Comparative Regionalism. The regime-boosting approach is now frequently referred to and used in a variety of debates within the larger field of Comparative Regionalism, for instance, in comparative scholarship on the performance of RIOs (Vinokurov & Libman, 2017), on legitimacy and democracy in RIOs (Agostinis & Closa, 2022), overlapping regionalism (Panke & Stapel, 2023), broader debates about regionalism and regime-stability (Börzel & Risse, 2019), and in scholarly debates on populism and regionalism (Söderbaum et al., 2021). However, its most significant impact has been in the literature on authoritarian regionalism, which has emerged as one of the most dynamic research strands within Comparative Regionalism in recent years.

Although the literature on authoritarian regionalism has had a certain preference for the study of Eurasia and Central Asia, it contains a comparative orientation which makes it open to influences from regional debates in the rest of the world, not least in Africa. Furthermore, unlike many earlier debates within the research field, scholars of authoritarian regionalism avoid false assumptions that non-African political elites are more benign than the African political elites. Just like when I developed the regime-boosting approach, they try to move beyond wishful thinking in order to come to grips with the *dark side of regionalism* (Debre, 2021).

While regime boosting constitutes an essential component of authoritarian regionalism, the concept has not only been adopted but also developed and specified as a theoretical framework. This has been necessary because the regime-boosting approach in its original version was somewhat underspecified in theoretical terms and not operationalised in a way that enabled systematic comparison. The literature on authoritarian regionalism has solved these weaknesses, which has resulted in a specification of more concrete regime-boosting mechanisms and strategies and a

rich number of studies. Below, I will highlight some of these developments linked to different theoretical standpoints.

In a review of the literature on authoritarian regionalism, Alessandra Russo and Edward Stoddard (2018) identified four regime-boosting mechanisms by which RIOs reinforce authoritarian rule: (i) emulation and localisation of international legitimate practices; (ii) creation of façade-legitimizing devices; (iii) delegitimation of Western norms and advancement of alternative values; and (iv) material support. In a separate study on regionalism in the post-Soviet space, Russo (2018) went on to revise the original regime-boosting concept in order to distinguish between two partly intersecting practices—*bureaucracy-boosting regionalism* and *sovereignty-shaping regionalism*—that are seen as essential for the strengthening of statehood of Eurasian states and for enhancing the resilience of Soviet-led networks by means of socialisation of political elites, policy-makers, and national as well as RIO bureaucracies (Russo, 2018, pp. 225–226).

Alexander Libman is one of the most prolific and influential scholars of authoritarian regionalism. A fair number of his publications have been written or edited with Anastassia Obydenkova and/or Evgeny Vinokurov. Libman and his collaborators emphasise a number of benefits of regionalism for authoritarian regimes (cf. Libman & Obydenkova, 2018a, 2018b; Vinokurov & Libman, 2017), such as (i) rhetorical support and trust-building between authoritarian leaders; (ii) legitimisation of autocratic practices, such as fraudulent elections or election monitoring; (iii) economic benefits and redistribution of resources to support weaker authoritarian states; and (iv) military interventions by leading regional powers to help weaker regimes to suppress opposition and protest. Although several of these benefits are consistent with my earlier research on regime-boosting in Africa, Libman's approach is different in at least two respects: the emphasis on the role of big (regional) powers and a certain emphasis on material benefits as opposed to my own focus on symbolic and ideational benefits.

Maria Debre has written a number of path-breaking articles about how and why RIOs help authoritarian regimes boost their survival (e.g. Debre, 2021). Whereas Libman and his colleagues often emphasise RIOs as tools for powerful member states (especially Russia), Debre develops a rationalist-institutionalist approach that defines RIOs as opportunity structures affecting the power distribution between domestic actors independently of big power politics. Debre conceives regime-boosting regionalism as a process of executive empowerment via four regime-boosting strategies: (i) regime-legitimation; (ii) strengthening of repressive political systems; (iii) co-optation of intra-elite groups, opposition, and challengers; and (iv) appeasement and protection against international enemies. Debre's approach specifies how RIOs help autocrats to survive when they are able to successfully employ material, informational, and ideational resources to strengthen any one of the domestic survival strategies from the autocrat's regime-boosting toolbox. Even if my own version of regime-boosting is rooted in critical theory and differs from Debre's rationalism-institutionalism, there is still a considerable similarity regarding how we define and understand regime-boosting strategies.

Conclusion: Future

Judging from its appeal in the literature on Comparative Regionalism, it seems safe to claim that regime-boosting exists as a phenomenon. While regime-boosting emerged as a rather loose approach to capture African logic, it has been developed into a more coherent theoretical construct during the last decade, especially thanks to the work by scholars associated with authoritarian regionalism. However, despite many new studies on various regime-boosting mechanisms and strategies across different regional contexts, there is still no cumulative and organised research agenda on regime-boosting itself. I conclude this essay with five propositions for its future development.

1. *Separate context from theory and increase comparison.* While leading scholars of authoritarian regionalism, such as Debre and Libman, systematically engage in comparisons, many other studies are case studies or focus on particular regions, which makes it somewhat difficult to separate context from theory. This was also a weakness in my own earlier research. The next step of research is to continue to specify what is general across different regional contexts and conditions by increasing comparisons in time and space. Indeed, there is a need to compare not only across regions but also over time. It is, for instance, plausible to consider whether regime-boosting has actually decreased in Africa during the last two decades. Another interesting hypothesis is whether regime-boosting has increased in Europe in recent decades.
2. *Specify and test (competing) theories, hypotheses, and causal mechanisms.* While the literature on authoritarian regionalism has successfully theorised and operationalised causal mechanisms and a variety of regime-boosting strategies, the next step of development is to ensure that theoretical propositions and hypotheses can be systematically compared against each other, ideally in a similar way as in the European integration debate. Two broad sets of issues demand increased consideration. First, there is still limited knowledge of how important the regime-boosting phenomenon really is. It is necessary to compare regime-boosting mechanisms/strategies against competing theoretical propositions and explanations (which is rarely done in existing research). Second, there is a need for continued theory-building and methodological development. It is necessary to determine which regime-boosting mechanisms and strategies are the most important, particularly to compare ideational and material benefits. And how do we know that regimes have been more stable than they would have been otherwise due to regime-boosting regionalism? What is the empirical basis for the claim about raising regime status and legitimacy?
3. *Problematising the malign effects of regime-boosting.* While there is considerable evidence that regime boosting is indeed a crucial factor in many regions around the world, it operates within a complex ecosystem of motivations, pressures, and outcomes. Although regime-boosting may be a goal for many political regimes, it does not preclude other objectives. For instance, while leaders may use RIOs (such as ALBA, ASEAN, AU, EAC, and SADC) to bolster the legitimacy of their

political regimes, it is clear that these organisations have also achieved a range of tangible collective goods. Hence, even if regime-boosting regionalism certainly may be malign, it is by no means always the case, and the regime-boosting approach needs to handle this. A related possibility is that regime-boosting reproduces unexpected or unintended (benign) benefits. As Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse (2019) elaborated, one plausible way forward might be to view the need for regime stability associated with regime boosting in terms of functional demands. Their key point is that regime stability through regime-boosting is not automatically detrimental to citizens or to public goods achievement. In fact, regime stability may be a requirement for benign regionalism. This might require a problematisation of the dependent variable or considering whether, when, and in what sense regime-boosting can be positive from a normative point of view. A new hypothesis would be whether regime boosting can facilitate the public goods achievement or broader national interests (beyond regime stability).

4. *Transcend the democracy-autocracy binary.* The literature on authoritarian regionalism focuses strictly on autocratic political regimes. In fact, the research tradition is based on a binary between democratic-autocratic states/regimes, according to which democratic regimes are generally viewed as *good*, whereas autocratic regimes are largely viewed as *bad*. This binary contradicts the intentions of the regime-boosting approach, which assumes that democratic regimes may enact the same (or at least similar) practices and strategies as autocratic regimes, for instance, through rhetorical, ceremonial, and legitimacy-enhancing regionalism. Although it is reasonable to hypothesise that pure autocracies (or deeply neo-patrimonial political regimes) may have a higher propensity to engage in regime-boosting, it is clear that democratic regimes may also do so, which can be illustrated by the burgeoning literature on recognition and status in world politics (also see Börzel & Risse, 2019). It is thus essential to analyse the similarities and differences between autocratic and democratic regimes. Instead of a dichotomy between autocratic and democratic regimes, a better way out is to treat the distinction as a continuum and to engage in comparisons across different regime types. This would also make it easier to account for the fact that populist regimes have emerged as an increasingly relevant category for regime boosting, both in Europe and in other parts of the world (Söderbaum et al., 2021). This would also enable research on regime boosting to avoid the constraining boundaries of authoritarian regionalism. In fact, one of the most interesting new hypotheses is to assess the strength of regime-boosting in Europe, especially in the EU.
5. *Clarify the role of RIOs.* A final issue for future regime-boosting studies concerns whether it is contingent on particular institutional designs. A widespread belief in the literature is that high-authority RIOs constrain and discipline state behaviour, which would limit the possibilities of regime-boosting. While there is considerable evidence of regime-boosting regionalism in low-authority RIOs, there is at the same time a considerable literature that regime-boosting can also take place within medium- or even high-authority RIOs, such as AU, CARICOM, COMESA, ECOWAS, and OAS. An interesting avenue of future research is thus

to increase our knowledge of when, why, and in what sense the authority of RIOs shapes regime boosting. A hypothesis that would challenge conventional literature is that regime-boosting may depend on authoritative RIOs. Again, assessing regime-boosting within the EU would be a particularly promising research exercise.

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Essay 6: Interrogating the Divide—Evaluating the African Regionalism Scholarly Community



Lynda Chinenye Iroulo

Introduction

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”—African Proverb.

The proverb, commonly associated with several African communities, underscores the importance of cooperation and solidarity in realising enduring objectives. Although its precise roots remain unclear, its message strikes a profound chord throughout the continent, mirroring the communal spirit that permeates numerous African societies. The most crucial aspect of a community is achieving long-term goals—any well-structured community accomplishes objectives that may be difficult or impossible for individuals to achieve independently.

Similarly, this holds for scholarly circles. The proverb aptly captures how epistemic communities transform regionalism studies: while individual scholars may produce quick results, a diverse epistemic community creates the collective foundation for deeper and more lasting insights into regional dynamics. The study of African regionalism is a dynamic and expanding area of research that has grappled with crucial questions. Individually, scholars have explored the history of African regionalism (Legum, 1976), as well as its various forms, including economic (Asante, 1986), security arrangements (Karbo & Murithi, 2018), and regionalism from below (Witt, 2018). While these questions help us better understand the intricate regional dynamics that guide policy-making processes, we must also examine the scholarly community itself—particularly given that scholars have critiqued International Relations for excluding African-based contributions (Odoom & Andrews, 2017), in addition to a finding that shows that Global South-based scholars mostly cite Western-derived IR theory, and have to go through Western platforms to be recognised globally (Risse et al., 2022). To what extent do global scholars of African

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_6

regionalism create synergy? This enquiry directly addresses how the African regionalism scholarly community organises itself, broadening and deepening the field. Hence, we need an assessment of the current composition and interaction of the scholarly community that shapes our knowledge and understanding of regionalism in Africa. An academic landscape analysis identifies networks, bridges divides and strengthens scholarly synergy.

Studying how African regionalism scholars organise reveals who shapes the field and exposes dominant and marginalised perspectives, theories, and methodologies. This analysis reveals potential divides, synergies, and power dynamics that shape research directions. It also reveals who visibly speaks for Africa in African regionalism studies.

Examining scholarly networks strengthens research capacity and infrastructure. Identifying strengths, weaknesses, and gaps enables targeted investments in training, mentorship, and institutional support. These insights also shape teaching and learning materials, ensuring that educational resources incorporate diverse narratives and current research, thereby providing students with a comprehensive grounding in the topic. Understanding the community's structure, divergences, and convergences contributes to a more inclusive field of study.

In this essay, I evaluate the African regionalism scholarly community through six highly cited articles by scholars from Western-based and African-based institutions, exploring their citation networks.¹ I selected these articles from Google Scholar's top results for *African regionalism*. While Google's algorithm may reflect the preferences of my US university location and potentially bias results toward Western publications, the focus on scholars from both African and Western institutions addresses, to some extent, this limitation. Highly cited articles represent the field's most visible research and often shape current and future discourse. Their citation patterns reveal the intellectual lineage and evolution of ideas over time, allowing focused analysis of influential works.

The essay is organised into four main sections. Section two offers a concise overview of academic discourses within African regionalism scholarly communities, providing context for the current state of research. Section three forms the core of the essay, presenting the results of a citation analysis of African regionalism literature. This section examines the causes and implications of the divergence found within the scholarly community and proposes strategies for bridging identified gaps in research and collaboration. Finally, Section four concludes the essay by summarising key findings and discussing their implications for the future of African regionalism studies.

¹ I will not be citing the six articles as this is not intended to be a critique of their work but a basis of understanding how the African regionalism scholarly community is organised.

Academic Discourse on African Regionalism

African regionalism studies have undergone significant evolution as a field of academic research. Scholars have investigated the drivers behind regionalism, examining political, economic, and social factors that motivate African states to pursue regional integration (Legum, 1976). They also assessed the effectiveness of regional organisations, such as the African Union (AU) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs), in promoting regionalism and achieving their goals (Adedeji, 1970). The field has examined challenges to regional integration, such as political instability, economic disparities, and infrastructure deficiencies (Eke & Ani, 2017). Researchers analysed how these factors hindered progress and proposed strategies to overcome them (Makinda et al., 2015). The role of external actors, including former colonial powers, international organisations, and emerging powers, in shaping African regionalism has also been a focus, highlighting the complex interplay between regional and global dynamics (Mazrui, 1964).

Economic questions have been central to the study of African regionalism. Scholars have examined the benefits and costs of regional integration, assessing the impact of trade liberalisation, investment flows, and economic policy coordination on growth and development (Asante, 1986). Comparative analyses of other forms of regionalism worldwide have provided valuable insights (Glas & Balogun, 2020). Peace and security issues have been prominent in the scholarship. Researchers have explored the role of regional security arrangements, such as the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) (Murithi, 2016), in promoting stability and conflict resolution. They have analysed the effectiveness of these arrangements and proposed ways to strengthen their capacity and legitimacy.

Scholars have critically examined questions of sovereignty and autonomy in the context of African regionalism. They have investigated how regionalism affects the decision-making power of African states and its implications for national governance and democratic accountability. Debates have emerged regarding regionalism's capacity to enhance a state's power against external actors, weighed against concerns about eroding national sovereignty (Makubalo et al., 2020). Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the cultural dimensions of African regionalism. Researchers have explored the role of regional identity, shared values, and people-to-people interactions in fostering integration and building African unity (Witt, 2019)—the importance of making regionalism more inclusive and responsive to citizens' needs.

Despite this rich and diverse scholarship, one of the major challenges of the field is that it remains Western-centric. African scholars offer valuable insights that challenge dominant International Relations (IR) constructs; however, they remain isolated from each other in a hub-and-spoke system, where their work must pass through the transatlantic core for global recognition, thereby preventing direct South-South theoretical exchanges that could fundamentally transform the discipline (Odoom & Andrews, 2017; Risse et al., 2022). The field of global regionalism has not been immune to this either. Regionalism has been based on European integration experiences or derived from Western-centric IR theories (Acharya, 2014). Scholars have

advocated for more inclusivity and attention to critical approaches from the Global South. African regionalism has been viewed and driven by Western scholarship,² regardless of the extensive literature by African scholars since the 1960s (Iroulo & Lenz, 2022). This attitude creates a divide in the community, giving Western-based scholars unfair visibility and disproportionate influence in shaping the field. The following section will explore this divide in detail, examining its manifestations, causes and potential strategies for bridging the gap.

Is There an African Regionalism Scholarly Community?

While African regionalism scholars form a distinct community, I show that they often work in isolation, failing to consistently engage with their peers' research. Through a focused analysis of the most-cited articles from six prominent scholars, three based at Western institutions³ and three at African institutions⁴—I explore the interaction across spaces. Using Google Scholar and specific keywords,⁵ I identified relevant publications from 2004 to 2010. I conducted the database search in English. I categorised scholars based solely on the institutional affiliation listed in their publications, not on their nationality or country of origin. I classified authors with double affiliations by their primary institutional affiliation. From the initial search results, I selected the first ten articles from each group and then identified the three most cited articles from each based on Google Scholar citations. Citation ranges were 250–500 for Western scholars and 150–250 for African scholars (to date), with more than 1500 views for all. I focused on articles rather than books to enable systematic citation tracking. Google Scholar's algorithm potentially favours English-language and Western-hosted publications, introducing a geographic bias toward the visibility of Global North scholarship. However, the inclusion of African-based scholarship, which is the least visible, helps address this bias.

This approach reduces bias by ignoring authors' identities or ontological stances, using citation counts as objective selection metrics to assess engagement patterns in African regionalism scholarship. It avoids assuming that African-born scholars only engage with the continent or that regional scholarship is always locally recognised. Instead, it focuses on scholarly visibility through citations to identify geographical divides between scholarly communities.

² Works by Western-based scholars (regardless of background), who despite African scholars' valuable contributions, receive disproportionate visibility in academic discourse.

³ These are scholars based at Western universities and research institutions.

⁴ These are scholars based at African universities and research institutions.

⁵ Like: African Regionalism, African Union, Organisation of African Unity and all RECs.

Interrogating the Divide

The data examines their engagement with the academic community in two spheres. First, I analyse the antecedent citations, reviewing all references within each focal article. This approach enables the identification of scholarly works that the authors engage with and cite, providing insight into the intellectual foundations that shape their research.

Second, I conducted a forward citation analysis to assess derivative work. This involved systematically scraping Google and connected papers to identify articles that cited the focal work after its publication. This dual approach enabled me to map the scholarly influences informing each article and its subsequent impact on the field—in terms of who cites them. By analysing these bidirectional citation patterns, I aimed to understand the primary influences on each author's work and the extent to which other authors engaged with and built upon their contributions, offering a comprehensive view of each article's position within the broader network of articles in regionalism scholarship.

The citation analysis described above informed the creation of a visual representation of the African regionalism scholarly community. Figure 1 illustrates this organisation of intellectual engagement based on the focal articles:

This visualisation maps the organisation of the scholarly community. It reveals divisions among scholars based on their citation patterns, offering a graphical insight



Fig. 1 Visual representation of the African regionalism scholarly community

into the structure and dynamics of the field. The diagram highlights potential nodes of influence and patterns of engagement within the community of African regionalism scholars.

Figure 1 employs a colour-coded system⁶ to distinguish between scholars from Western-based⁷ institutions (orange blocks) and those from African-based institutions (blue blocks). The visualisation reveals a clear pattern: Western-based scholars predominantly cite other Western scholars in their antecedent works. These citations primarily span from the 1980s to the 2000s, with a notable concentration on works published in Western journals and books and by Western presses. It would be inaccurate to conclude that scholarship on African regionalism is limited to Western and African sources. However, the citation patterns observed in the analysis strongly focus on these two spheres. This raises important questions about the diversity of perspectives and the potential for intellectual siloes within the field.

Several factors may contribute to this phenomenon. First, scholars in Western institutions may primarily engage with research produced within similar institutional contexts, creating academic echo chambers. Second, many of these scholars may have received training in Western institutions, which could potentially influence their research consumption habits and theoretical frameworks. Additionally, large-scale research projects and funding institutions with specific interests in African regionalism often originate from Western countries, potentially shaping research agendas and citation practices (Iroulo & Tappe Ortiz, 2022). Moreover, Western publications may enjoy greater visibility and accessibility within academic circles, further reinforcing these citation patterns (Kessi et al., 2020).

Given these factors, the predominant use of Western scholarship by Western-based scholars in their studies of African regionalism is noteworthy but not entirely unexpected. This observation underscores the need for a more inclusive and diverse approach to scholarship in the field of African regionalism, one that actively seeks out and engages with a broader range of perspectives and sources.

The citation pattern observed among African scholars is the striking aspect of the analysis. Despite a substantial body of work by African-based scholars since the 1960s, the antecedent work of the focal articles, authored by African-based academics, predominantly cites Western scholarship published from the 1980s to the 2000s. This unexpected trend warrants further exploration and raises important questions about knowledge production and circulation in African regionalism in African institutions—one that this limited methodology cannot answer.

Several potential explanations emerge for this phenomenon. First, the educational background of many African scholars may play a significant role. Often trained using

⁶ Tableau was used for the data visualisation. The sum of elements in each block equals the total cited (antecedent) and citing works (derivative) from the three most cited articles. Blue blocks represent cited and citing works from African-based scholars' focal articles, while orange blocks represent cited and citing works from Western-based scholars' focal articles. I appreciate Neha Shrestha and Robert Laws for their invaluable support.

⁷ By Western, I mean scholars or publications from spaces in Europe, United States of America, and Canada.

Western scholarship or in Western institutions, these academics may naturally gravitate towards the theoretical frameworks and research paradigms they encountered during their studies (Lohaus & Wemheuer-Vogelaar, 2021). This educational influence could shape their research consumption habits and citation practices. Funding dynamics may also contribute to this trend. Research projects supported by Western institutions might align more closely with Western academic interests and perspectives, potentially influencing the literature that African scholars engage with and cite.

Additionally, the unfair legitimacy and visibility of Western scholarship in the global academic arena may exert pressure on African scholars to cite more Western literature in the hope of gaining similar recognition for their work (Serunkuma, 2024). The circulation and accessibility of academic literature present another possible factor. Western publications may enjoy wider distribution and availability within African academic spaces than local publications. This disparity in access could significantly impact citation practices, leading to an overrepresentation of Western sources.

The analysis of derivative works—articles citing the focal articles and their subsequent engagements—reveals intriguing patterns in African regionalism scholarship. African scholars significantly increased their publications from 2015 onwards. One possibility is that this apparent spike is simply a coincidence, resulting from the culmination of long publication processes that coincidentally converged around 2015. Instead, it could reflect a renewed interest coinciding with major developments like the AU Reforms and increased attention to economic integration, political cooperation, and implementation challenges. Post-2015 literature demonstrates rich research diversity. Scholars analysed regionalism's political economy, explored tensions between nationalism and regionalism, and evaluated the effectiveness of integration policies. These studies uncovered the driving forces behind regional initiatives and the factors influencing their success or failure, providing a nuanced understanding.

The analysis reveals an interesting form of *writing back*⁸ pattern. African-based scholars increasingly cite other African-based scholars, creating self-referential academic communities, while Western-based scholars predominantly cite other Western-based scholars. This indicates growing divergence, with more engagement occurring within groups than across them. Between antecedent and derivative works, engagement skews toward Western-based scholars for antecedents, while derivatives show community disconnect. Although increased African scholarship represents a positive development, a lack of African-based representation and limited cross-citation between communities undermines synergy. This creates parallel discourses that miss valuable insights—particularly problematic given African scholars' unique continental experiences.

The solution requires intentional, holistic approaches rather than arbitrary equal citation quotas. Since Western-based works often enjoy greater accessibility through open-access funding and favourable algorithms, scholars must deliberately seek

⁸ A more critical take on African regionalism, different from Western-centric perspectives.

out diverse perspectives. This includes cross-referencing African-hosted databases (AJOL, SciELO), consulting regional journals, engaging with broader Global South publications, and manually tracking the works of African-based scholars. During publication, peer reviewers and editors must ensure that authors engage comprehensively with all relevant scholarly communities.

These findings underscore the need for more intentional efforts to bridge the gap between African and Western scholarship on African regionalism. This could be achieved through more collaborative research, promoting cross-citations, and creating platforms for dialogue between these scholarly communities, which could enrich the field and lead to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of African regionalism.

Bridging the Divide

The division within the scholarly community studying African regionalism has several significant implications for the field of African regionalism. Building on the citation patterns revealing African and Western scholars increasingly forming separate academic communities, this fragmentation creates distinct theoretical and empirical blind spots. A primary concern is the risk of pursuing research questions disconnected from African realities. When Western-based scholars dominate antecedent citations while African scholars remain marginalised in foundational literature, subsequent research risks developing theoretical frameworks that fail to reflect continental experiences and needs.

This disconnect produces research that misinterprets key dynamics or addresses peripheral rather than pressing issues in African regionalism. Conversely, when African scholars primarily cite within their communities—as demonstrated in the analysis of derivative works—they may miss valuable comparative insights developed elsewhere. This mutual isolation impoverishes both communities, preventing the cross-pollination of ideas essential for robust scholarship that can adequately capture the complexity of African regionalism.

Another implication is the potential development of polarised theoretical frameworks. The scholarly divide could lead to extreme approaches that either idealise and exaggerate African experiences or oversimplify them by treating the continent as homogeneous. Both extremes are problematic, as they fail to capture the nuanced and diverse nature of African regionalism. The existence of parallel academic communities tends to foster contestation rather than collaboration. This hinders the development of nuanced and inclusive narratives about African regionalism. Instead of building on each other's work and creating a comprehensive understanding, scholars may end up working in isolation or opposition to one another.

The analysis reveals that to build a truly global community of African regionalism scholars, Western academics must acknowledge and actively engage with the existing work of African scholars, both past and present. This recognition and engagement

are crucial for developing a more holistic and accurate understanding of African regionalism.

Scholars must adopt a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to address the challenge of Western centrism in regionalism studies. It begins with actively incorporating diverse perspectives from Global South scholars into mainstream academic discourse, moving beyond mere citation to deep engagement with their ideas and methodologies. Emphasising the historical contexts of different regions, particularly in postcolonial settings, is crucial to avoid the misapplication of Western-derived theories. Developing theories from regional experiences rather than applying pre-existing Western frameworks can lead to more nuanced understandings. Encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration between IR scholars and Area Studies experts can combine theoretical rigour with deep regional knowledge. It is also vital to decolonise academic curricula to include more diverse viewpoints to shape future scholarship.

Supporting and promoting scholarship from the Global South through increased funding, publishing opportunities, and conference participation is crucial for amplifying these voices. Such interactions will drive synergy and cause Western and African-based scholars to reflect on potential biases and assumptions when studying African regionalism. Addressing structural inequalities in academic institutions that privilege Western perspectives is also necessary for long-term change by ensuring that seminars, workshops, and conferences are not designed to indoctrinate African scholars into researching the interests of Western funding institutions, but rather a space where knowledge can be exchanged and built upon. Some networks are actively doing this the right way, such as the Maria Sibylla Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa, the University of Ghana (MIASA), and Re-centering African Subjects and Subjectivities (RASS).

Conclusion

These preliminary findings from a citation analysis of antecedent and derivative works offer initial insights into divisions within the scholarly community of African regionalism studies. However, a comprehensive understanding requires deeper investigation. Future research should conduct in-depth case studies exploring the complex factors influencing citation practices among both African-based and Western-based scholars in this field. Such studies could examine structural barriers, including database accessibility, language preferences, institutional pressures, and publishing gatekeeping mechanisms that shape citation behaviours. Research might also investigate whether similar patterns exist across other regional studies fields or remain unique to African regionalism scholarship.

Future research can learn from this analysis by adopting more intentional methodological approaches, such as systematically tracking citation patterns across different databases and languages, examining institutional incentives that reward certain citation behaviours, and developing frameworks for measuring genuine intellectual

engagement versus superficial citation practices. Most importantly, future studies should model inclusive scholarship by deliberately engaging with diverse scholarly communities from the outset, demonstrating how cross-regional academic dialogue can yield a richer, more nuanced understanding of a complex phenomenon, such as African regionalism.

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Essay 7: The Middle East Amid the Changing Global Politics of Regionalism



Louise Fawcett

Introduction

Where does the Middle East region sit within the larger story of the origins and development of global regionalisms? Like other parts of the world, the region has experimented with various forms of informal and formal regionalism, yet its record is often viewed as one of comparative failure (Söderbaum, 2016). This essay looks critically at the Middle East experience. It argues that the Middle East has much to tell us about the larger journey of comparative regionalism and its place in a changing global order where liberal international narratives have been discredited and where power is more diffused. It speaks to the volume's larger concerns about uncovering the global origins, travel, and futures of regionalism, as well as the continuing relevance of mainstream theories.

Scholarly narratives and evidence on the ground demonstrate that the experience of regionalism in the geographical region known as the Middle East¹ is at best mixed, and at worst, one of failure (Aarts, 1999; Barnett & Gause, 1998; Harders & Legrenzi, 2008; Pinfari, 2009). Regional institutions, formal and informal, exist, but have not visibly increased cohesion and welfare among peoples; nor have they prevented or ended wars, overcome economic and social inequalities, or sufficiently addressed ongoing challenges like pandemics or climate change. Some institutions have fractured, died, or become moribund. This view stands in contrast to other regions where regionalism has been more successful in at least some of these areas. There are no *model* regionalisms: the European Union (EU) provides the most emulated example, but institutions in Latin America, Africa, and Pacific Asia can all claim positive

¹ Also referred to as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), it comprises the 22 members of the League of Arab States (LAS) plus Iran, Israel, and Turkey.

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achievements over time. Africa has developed a more unified peace and security architecture; the ASEAN family of institutions have built consensus and cooperative mechanisms across a range of issue areas, including security and trade; Latin American institutions have shown innovation, resilience, and adaptation in managing relationships with their powerful northern neighbour.

If the Middle East region has mostly remained outside these trends across regionalism's two main waves (post-1945 and post-1990, respectively), recent developments in the world of regionalism and multilateralism present a fresh panorama. Major geopolitical shifts alongside changes in domestic politics have challenged older paradigms and expectations. They suggest the advent of a third, or *post-revisionist* wave of regionalism and a parallel need to re-evaluate its progress and prospects (Tèlo et al., 2015). In a more decentred, yet still sovereigntist world, neither old nor newer theories of regionalism and cooperation accommodate the latest trends. On the one hand, there has been a gradual retreat from what we might call *first principles* in the world of regionalism. The metrics used to evaluate regionalism's first and second waves, coming from a toolbox which was largely informed by the European and North Atlantic post-war experience and its emulation, and then by institutional developments following the globalising effects of the end of the Cold War, seem less appropriate today, particularly in reference to the Middle East (Darwich, 2021; Fawcett, 2023). This is evidenced by a decline in the prospects of deeper integration and community building and a rise of newer forms of more *transactional*, or what some have called a *realist* regionalism (Beeson & Lee-Brown, 2021). On the other hand, in a world that is more multipolar, newer, so-called *rising* powers, including several Middle Eastern states, are now central players and compete for influence and attention in different institutional fora, both regional and extra-regional. The world remains highly globalised and interdependent, and there is a continuing demand for multilateralism. Yet at this new *regional-global* nexus, commitments to *liberal internationalism* have weakened, and the power of regions is accordingly enhanced. Regionalism coexists in a much more complex and competitive global landscape; within a part of a collage of multilateral institutions, in which existing hierarchies and norms are challenged, and a new balance of power is emerging.

The Middle East lies at the heart of the above trends. It provides a mirror on the new global politics of regionalism and, by extension, the contours of the emerging international order. This is no longer a region of *weak* or *failed* states, subject to external manipulation. Powerful Middle East states: Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and their allies, are part of a new regional hierarchy (Kamrava, 2018). They, together with *small* states like Qatar or the UAE (Sadiki & Saleh, 2023), regularly exercise influence in regional, cross-regional and international fora, making them game changers in the international system today: think of Saudi Arabia or Turkey's hosting of the Ukraine War negotiations or the UAE's mediation in the Gaza War. Consider also how the Middle East contributed to first the rollout (in Libya), and then rollback (in Bahrain and Syria) of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine post-Arab Uprisings (discussed below); or how different regional states can critically influence global supply chains—as in the Covid-19 pandemic or the Ukraine War. Even formerly

loyal allies are no longer at the beck and call of Western patrons; they have developed alternative alliance structures to promote their economic and security interests and advance distinctive regional norms and practices. Here one needs to look beyond the repertoires of older formal institutions like the League of Arab States (LAS) or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and European- and US-led regional partnerships and initiatives, which have hitherto dominated regional agendas, to the proliferation of more informal arrangements and affiliations, both within the region and in its hinterlands—like Central Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian Ocean—and alliances with a diverse range of global powers including Russia, China, and India. It is this criss-crossing institutional *assemblage*, characterised by greater fluidity, alongside older regional bodies, that is characteristic of today's Middle East, making the regional-global nexus of particular importance in a visibly changing international order.

In relocating the Middle East in the changing global story, this essay aims to contribute to a rethinking of regionalism's origins, travel, and to suggest a move away from earlier understandings and paradigms to better reflect contemporary realities. Rather than a simple critique of prevailing Western hierarchies and IR and a demand to bring in new voices and perspectives, it is an invitation to consider how changing geopolitical realities require us to look beyond West-non-West binaries to better understand the characteristics of the emerging world order and regionalism's place within it.

The following section maps the comparatively slow progress of Middle East regionalism across its two initial waves, considering the opportunities and constraints it has faced, arguing that it has hitherto been theoretically, but also geographically, *caged* by Eurocentric and liberal institutionalist theories, borrowing an expression from the editors' introduction, limiting its understanding. The final section juxtaposes this view against the third emerging wave of recent decades, which constitutes a revisionist trend—and reveals a new regional-global nexus—with which regionalism studies need to catch up. This new nexus has become apparent since the start of the twenty-first century, with a shift in domestic politics, power hierarchies and accompanying normative frames. In it, Middle East *actorness*, part of a wider phenomenon across the regions of the Global South, represented by the BRICS+ , or new forms of non-alignment, for example, has strengthened, suggesting that the region should be placed at the front and centre of debates about how regions and regionalisms are fundamentally contributing to and changing the contours and understanding of international order.

Others have made prior claims for a resurgence of regions and their importance (particularly during its second wave (Farrell et al., 2005; Katzenstein, 2005)), but this juncture is qualitatively and quantitatively different, as expectations of regionalism today are no longer reflective of liberal institutionalist priors or formal organisation. Of course, this claim remains tentative. For all the talk of *crisis*, the fragmentation of multilateralism, evidence of new authoritarian-populist turns, and the *end of the liberal international order*, prevailing global trends and the place of regions within them are still debated. Further, the volatile state of the Middle East region itself, not least following the destructive cycle of violence unleashed by Hamas attacks

of October 2023, makes firm predictions difficult. Nevertheless, it can be said with some certainty that there will be no return to the *old* world of regionalism and multilateralism of the second half of the twentieth century, and that powerful new global actors, including MENA actors, and their alliances and institutions, will continue actively to reshape the parameters of upcoming orders.

History: Waves One and Two...

In the Middle East, regionalism, understood as formal and informal processes of cooperation between proximate states, parallels the history of the study of regionalism itself. If formal regionalism dates from 1945, it was preceded, in the Ottoman period, by strong societal and commercial networks—a dense architecture of more informal regionalisms relevant to today’s discussion, particularly where regional borders and identities remain contested. Outside the Americas, with their distinctive history of post-independence regionalism, the Arab Middle East was one of the first regions to establish, in 1945, a formal regional organisation, the League of Arab States (LAS), making it, in one former League Secretary General’s words, the UN’s historical twin (Moussa, 2012). The UN Charter duly recognised the agency of the LAS alongside other regional bodies in establishing their roles and responsibilities in relation to the world body. Despite such auspicious beginnings, however, and the evident cultural and linguistic affinities binding Arab states, the organisation was slow to advance any common security or economic agenda, causing scholars to ask if it simply had been *designed to fail*, by trying to balance the competing expectations of state sovereignty and Arab unity (Barnett & Solingen, 2009; Gomaa, 1977). From the start, the central question of Palestine united but also divided Arab states, as it does today. Inter-Arab competition for leadership, the consolidation of mostly authoritarian regimes, together with strong, outward-facing trade and security networks, made early Middle East regionalism look like an outlier. Subsequent decades saw punctuated efforts at regional cooperation via the League, like attempts to create an Arab free trade area; Western-sponsored security pacts, like the Baghdad Pact/Cento, and the appearance of sub-regional bodies, like the GCC in 1981, and the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) and Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) in 1989. But, with one exception—when the Arab OPEC coalition forced a significant oil price rise in response to the 1973 Arab-Israel War—the legacies left by such groups and their activities appeared slim.

The second post-Cold War wave proved scarcely more successful than the first. Amid prevailing globalising and liberalising trends, which saw significant institutional expansion and reform across other regions—whether Africa, East and South-east Asia or Latin America—the region remained on the margins of *new regionalism*, still experiencing the negative effects of unipolarity, persistent conflicts, and embedded authoritarianism, none of which were effectively addressed by regional bodies. The externally led Middle East Peace Process (MEPP), which followed the 1991 Gulf War, and dominated the 1990s, offered the prospect of a more unified approach to a basket of regional issues—a kind of Arab *Conference on Security and*

Cooperation - but it had broken down by the end of the decade, and a period of great instability ensued. The early failure of the short-lived ACC (following Iraq's invasion of fellow member Kuwait) and stagnation of the AMU (a promising EU-influenced economic project hampered from the start by interstate rivalries) were indicative of the kinds of problems faced in regionalism's new wave. The GCC proved a partial exception, given the shared histories and security concerns of the Gulf monarchies, notably in respect to the threat from revolutionary Iran. It experienced a period of relative success, expanding functional cooperation across sectors including trade, education, and financial networks, but never developed into a more integrated economic or *security community* (Barnett & Gause, 1998), as subsequent events revealed.

This overview shows how regionalism in the Middle East may have appeared superficially to emulate dominant global and inter-regional trends, but also failed against those metrics. This terrain is familiar, but also misleading. Before turning to more recent developments and changes in the wider world of multilateralism, there are two points to highlight regarding the limitations of prior framings in approaches to regionalism. The first is geography: the Middle East is a constructed region whose boundaries were defined and policed by outsiders, notably the colonial powers, then superpowers, for whom the region had strategic and economic purposes, and preservation of the status quo became of primary importance. This alone need not have prevented cooperation—other regions have powerful colonial legacies—but the Middle East was *born fighting*, and many of its boundaries were also new, artificial, and repeatedly challenged. Authoritarianism became the default mode of governance. Further, the inclusion of three powerful non-Arab states: Iran, Israel, and Turkey, with distinctive orientations and interests, and strong links to external, initially Western states, made finding any equilibrium difficult from the start. In other words, the geographical definition of the region simply did not enhance realistic prospects for cooperation, as critical theorists have shown (Bilgin, 2019).

The second, and related point, concerns the utility of IR theories and whether they provide the best framework to understand the region. Middle East regionalism, trapped in powerful *geo-epistemologies* (Barkawi et al., 2023), has suffered from the attempt to measure it by yardsticks designed for somewhere else. The region evidently constituted an interdependent security *complex* but lacked the conditions to become a security community (Barnett & Adler, 1998), even if this appeared possible over the years of the MEPP. Similarly, efforts at economic cooperation were hampered by persistent conflict, but also by the low levels of cross-regional trade and dependence on external partners. Ernst Haas (1970, pp. 628–629), writing of the weakness of *pre-theories* of economic integration, identified the problem by noting how neofunctionalism had demonstrated no *predictive powers* outside Western Europe. Economic integration is a demanding condition unlikely to occur among states where the regional market is small, as in the MENA case; political integration is also unlikely among mostly unaccountable authoritarian regimes, just as a security community will be hard to establish when multiple conflicts exist at the regional level. Given regional rivalries, contradictory external pressures, and the lack of compelling economic arguments, there are not enough like-minded states

to foster more accountable and inclusive institutions. Further, regime insecurity has made states averse to institutional constraints (Tripp, 1995). The question of whether such political and economic framings are still useful or relevant to understanding contemporary patterns of cooperation in the Middle East and elsewhere is considered in the following section.

...and Three: Toward a New Regional-Global Nexus?

The first two decades of the twenty-first century saw enormous changes in the Middle East, alongside significant challenges to the *global regionalism* project itself, buffeted by financial crisis, wars, the pandemic, and neo-authoritarian trends. Recent shifts away from *liberal* multilateralism and neo-functionalist logics have fostered a more *transactional* style of regionalism. This new transactionalism (unlike its predecessor) aligns with a realist or interests-based foreign policy where states pursue flexible bilateral or mini-lateral arrangements to secure desired regional agendas (Hellmüller & Salaymeh, 2025). Such shifts, also associated with US foreign policy under President Trump, have made the region appear less of an outlier and part of a new regional-global nexus characterised by thinner multilateralism, but also fluidity, informality, and multi-alignment.

At first sight, the region followed a rather similar trajectory, revealing certain opportunities, but also multiple constraints to cooperation. The Iraq War, for example, generated widespread regional opposition without producing unity, despite continuing efforts of external actors like the US and EU to promote their respective projects: the *Greater Middle East Initiative* and the *European Neighbourhood Policy*. The emerging Middle East defied such designs, and the Arab Uprisings, where long-standing regimes were toppled by powerful social movements, initiated a period of volatility and confusion. At first, in the wake of such pressures, there were some coordinated policies by the LAS and GCC and talk of a timely revival of regionalism. With Western encouragement and UN backing, there was Arab support for UN Resolution 1973 on Libya and subsequent attempts at mediation in Yemen and Syria. Yet it would be misleading to see the fleeting embrace of *humanitarian intervention* by Arab states and institutions as a sustained commitment to collective action, or the end of regional *exceptionalism* (Beck, 2015; Salloukh, 2013). The GCC intervention in 2011 to crush the uprising in Bahrain, or later the Saudi-led intervention against the Houthis in Yemen, told a different story, as Arab monarchies sought to secure their regimes against growing sectarian threats. These were pragmatic and instrumental responses to crisis management, orchestrated by leading regional states like Saudi Arabia.

Over time, as the Arab system came under increasing challenge, clearer patterns started to emerge, characterised by regional power shifts and greater institutional and alliance fluidity (Del Sarto & Lecha, 2024; Katz, 2025). The new order was characterised by two or two-and-a-half sub-systems or ‘poles’ (Salem, 2022). The first

coalesced around a *Quartet* of states, comprising Saudi Arabia and fellow *moderates* like Egypt, Bahrain, and the UAE; the second around Iran, and the so-called Resistance Axis, comprising Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and, until its recent demise, the Assad regime in Syria. Turkey and Qatar, embracing distinctive policies to advance their regional interests and leadership credentials, formed a looser third pole. Rather than formal institutions, these arrangements were characterised by more informal and ad hoc alliances. The Quartet, for example, was designed to oppose Qatar's regional pretensions. Another novel development was the Abraham Accords, signed in 2020, a series of new bilateral agreements normalising relations between Israel and four Arab states, adding to those previously signed by Egypt and Jordan.

Beyond these novel and still fluid regional arrangements, another important aspect of the *new* Middle East has been the far greater autonomy of states in their choice of external alliance partners and institutional affiliations in the emerging multipolar international system—a feature true of other regions. If the Syrian civil war had provided Russia with a much-desired re-entry point into the Middle East, China benefited from the window of opportunity provided by the relative decline in Western, mostly US influence and legitimacy, by developing multiple new trade and energy links with the region under the loose BRI framework. By 2024, China had become the GCC's leading trading partner, with the bloc accounting for 36% of its crude oil imports. Other developments signalling the region's multi-alignment include the *Quad*, a grouping that includes India, Israel, the UAE, and the US (I2U2), or the BRICS+ , which has brought Iran, Egypt and (tentatively) Saudi Arabia into the original grouping. Middle East states today are engaged with a wide variety of different states and institutions in the region's hinterlands, notably in Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, and the Indian Ocean, indicating their increasingly diverse interests and global reach. Iran is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and Turkey has long held observer status in the AU. Despite ongoing conflict and instability in Gaza, Yemen and Syria, such patterns are likely to continue.

Conclusion

The Middle East, with its changing regional architecture, is representative of the deeply entangled relationship between regional and global order. As such, it is a “laboratory of contemporary world politics” (Brownlee & Ghiabi, 2025, p. xxvi). This essay has sought to locate the Middle East experience within the changing global politics of regionalism. It has explored whether the original questions undergirding the study of regionalism are fit for purpose in explaining not only the Middle East experience but, by extension, the state of regionalism in the contemporary international order. In a world where prior models have become discredited and the balance of power has shifted away from the West, the Middle East provides an exemplary case to reveal the new regional-global nexus at work, one where powerful states and shifting alliance systems can substitute for formal organisations. Just as China brokered the talks to break the impasse between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Arab states

chose non-alignment over the war in Ukraine, or Saudi Arabia has hosted recent talks between protagonists in that war, this is an activist region in a world of regions with real clout, no longer part of a US *imperium* (Katzenstein, 2005). Formal institutions still matter: the Arab League has set out its reconstruction plan for Gaza to balance the ambitions of the US and Israel, and the GCC has overcome recent internal tensions and will continue to offer a *low common denominator* regionalism which allows states to engage in regime boosting policies. The Arab system continues to evolve (Dessouki, 2015), but in considering its legacies and pathways within the larger MENA setting, this is a different kind of regionalism from that imagined by liberal institutionalists. It is one that reflects new regional and international hierarchies and a more transaction-based approach towards cooperation and foreign policy making. As such, it points to alternative futures for both regional and global ordering.

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Essay 8: Chinese Perspectives on Regionalism in International Relations



Xiefeng Geng

Introduction

In both international and Chinese academic circles, regionalism studies (RS) have emerged as a new area of scholarly growth. Internationally, since the late 1990s, RS has developed into “an academic growth industry” (De Lombaerde et al., 2010, p. 752) across various branches of social sciences, such as European Studies, Comparative Politics, International Economics, International Geography, International Relations (IR), and International Political Economy (IPE). Even as Fredrik Söderbaum noted, RS has “moved into centre place in international theory” (2016, p. 15). In China, regionalism research also entered the field of Chinese IR in the mid-to-late 1990s, eventually rising to become a new “special school” within Chinese IR scholarship (Wang, 2006, p. 34). At the same time, some scholars have actively advocated for studying new regionalism from a Chinese perspective (Geng, 2005), striving to build a unique academic field of regionalism studies in China (RSC).

A 30-Year Academic History of RSC

Over more than 30 years of development, RSC has attracted scholars from multiple generations and generated a succession of rich and insightful papers, monographs, and translations. It has also inspired novel topics for successive generations of graduate students. Over these three decades, RSC has focused on Asian practices and Chinese experiences, integrating external theoretical insights to establish a unique conceptual system and discourse space. The field persists in its exploration of new

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University
Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_8

theories and methodologies, evolving into a significant sub-discipline within Chinese IR and remaining an important research topic in Chinese IPE.

From the beginning, RSC adopted an interdisciplinary approach to integrate research findings from various fields, such as Economic Geography, Cultural Anthropology, Global History, Comparative Politics, and Area Studies. Today, the international academic landscape of RS has evolved, with a growing emphasis on moving “beyond the ‘new regionalism’” (Hettne, 2005) to “rethinking regionalism” (Söderbaum, 2016), and scholars are calling for a wider acceptance of different theoretical approaches and methods, across different regions and policy areas, promoting a research agenda of “truly comparative regionalism” (Börzel & Risse, 2016, p. 4). In response, RSC has actively engaged with and intersected with rapidly evolving disciplines in Global Studies and Area and Country Studies within China, striving to establish a new field of Comparative Regionalism that incorporates both a global perspective and Chinese characteristics.

The development of RSC as an academic field has unfolded through a gradual historical process. A comprehensive review of literature from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) over the past 30 years (1991–2020) identifies three distinct periods in RSC’s academic history: the Genesis Period (1991–2000), the Takeoff Period (2001–2010), and the Plateau Period (2011–2020). Each period is marked by specific academic characteristics: innovation and renewal during the Genesis Period, openness and inclusiveness in the Takeoff Period, and stabilisation and transition in the Plateau Period (Geng, 2022). Currently, RSC continues to evolve. Overall, the progression of RSC through these phases and into the present highlights the following characteristics. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the development trends in RSC over the past 30 years.

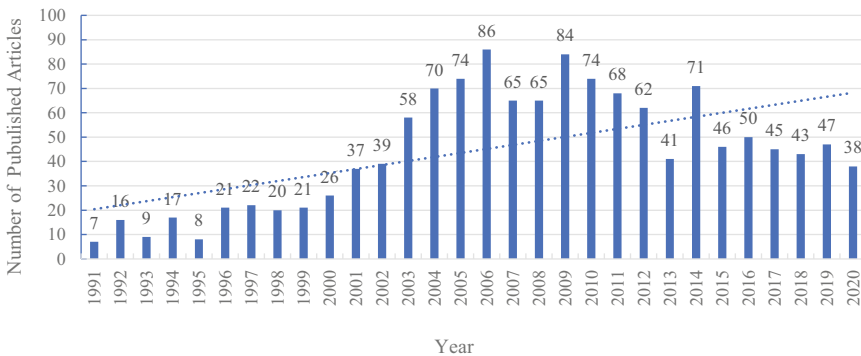


Fig. 1 Trend of Annual Publications on Regionalism (1991–2020). *Note* This figure is based on journal article data retrieved from CNKI between 1991 and 2020. The author used *regionalism* and *new regionalism* as primary search keywords, focusing on four disciplines: Chinese Politics and International Politics, Economic System Reform, Trade Economics, and Political Science. After manually deduplicating and excluding articles from academic conferences and newspapers, only those from academic and featured journals were retained, resulting in a total of 1,330 articles. *Source* Data from CNKI Database (<https://www.cnki.net>).

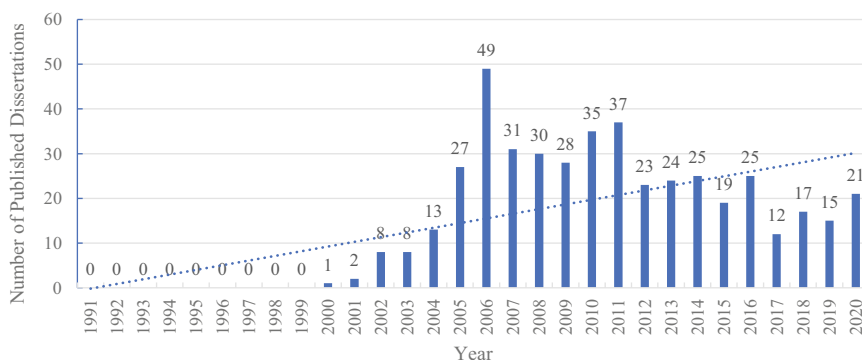


Fig. 2 Trend of Annual Dissertations on Regionalism (1991–2020). *Source* Data from CNKI Database (<https://www.cnki.net>). *Note* This figure is based on dissertation data retrieved from CNKI between 1991 and 2020. The search criteria were identical to those used in Fig. 1, resulting in 450 master's and doctoral dissertations

During the Genesis Period (1991–2000), driven by the global resurgence of regionalism and China's involvement in regional cooperation practices, RSC began to emerge. The first generation of regionalism researchers advocated abandoning outdated regionalism concepts in favour of studying new regionalism, reflecting a distinct inclination towards innovation and renewal. Chinese IR scholarship has long engaged with regionalism phenomena and issues, primarily focusing on Western Europe and European integration, and has even advocated for the development of a *European Studies* framework in China (Chen, 2001a). This focus led to a long-standing neglect of regionalism practices in Asia and insufficient attention to regionalism in other southern regions, such as Africa and Latin America. It was only after China joined a regional economic cooperation organisation, APEC, as a sovereign state in 1991 and established a formal dialogue partnership with ASEAN in the same year that Chinese scholars began to step out of the *European integration* framework and explore broader theories of *regionalism* or *regional studies*. At the same time, efforts to establish *Asia-Pacific Studies* started to become a notable academic trend in Chinese IR (Chen, 1999). In summary, through the interaction between theory and practice, Chinese academia during this period has innovatively expanded the interpretative and analytical horizons for regionalism practices, giving rise to the development of RSC (Li, 1999; Pang, 1999; Xiao, 2000; Zhu, 1997a, 1997b).

During the Takeoff Period (2001–2010), RSC made significant strides, even experiencing a booming phase of development. During this time, the research community expanded considerably. In addition to the active advocacy and involvement of mid-career scholars such as Wang Yizhou (2003; 2006; 2010), Qin Yaqing (2004 with Wang; 2007 with Wei; 2009), Zhang Yunling (2001, 2005, 2010, 2015), a new generation of scholars began to make their mark, including Chen Yugang (2001b, 2005, 2009), Geng Xiefeng (2001, 2003, 2005), Xiao Huanrong (2003a, 2003b, 2005), and others. Numerous academic works, including translated texts, were published, and the field's influence grew, providing intellectual insights for national

foreign policy formulation and prompting the Chinese government to develop its own regional strategies. During this period, Chinese scholars, drawing on both Chinese and Asian contexts while engaging with global perspectives, embraced the concepts of Open Regionalism and accommodated diverse viewpoints. They engaged in in-depth discussions on the ascent, institutional development, and shared vision of East Asian regionalism, which elevated RSC to new levels, marked by its openness and inclusiveness (Chen, 2007).

During the Plateau Period (2011–2020), influenced by profound changes in the international landscape, the overall academic ecosystem of RSC underwent alterations. The prevailing trend indicated a decline in the prominence of East Asian regionalism, accompanied by an increase in criticism and reflection on its development. Meanwhile, the volume of regionalism-related literature remained relatively high, although the topics covered became more dispersed and expansive. There was no “decline in the East Asian regionalism narrative” (Yeo, 2020), but rather a plateau. Strictly speaking, the overall characteristics of RSC during this period can be summarised as stabilisation and transition. Although the development was generally steady, there was a shift towards comparative studies, with expanded topics and more integrated perspectives, and the research became more refined. Importantly, as the international academic community consciously worked to consolidate Comparative Regionalism as a distinct field in the second decade of the twenty-first century, RSC began to exhibit new trends of transformation and development (Geng, 2021a; Wang, 2017; Wei, 2021; Xing, 2014; Xu & Shen, 2021).

Ten Major Topics in RSC

During the Genesis Period of the 1990s, RSC was exploratory in nature, primarily focusing on theoretical debates concerning *the distinction between new and old regionalism, the interrelationship among regionalism, globalism, and nationalism*, and concepts like *Open Regionalism*. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, RSC has advanced rapidly. In addition to continuing discussions on these topics, it has increasingly concentrated on more in-depth and nuanced topics such as *the East Asian Community, comparisons of regionalism between Europe and Asia, inter-regionalism, the East Asian Order, the complexity of regional institutions, regional public goods, and Connectivity and Interconnection*. Academic discussions and debates on these ten topics reflect RSC’s overall landscape and dynamic nature. A detailed analysis of these discussions has been conducted (Geng, 2023), but it will be briefly outlined here.

The topic of *the distinctions between new and old regionalism* originated at the beginning of RSC, aiming to address issues related to perspectives on regionalism phenomena. It also encompasses differing views on the nature of regionalism, its historical origins, and its stages of development. *New regionalism* was a popular concept at the time, with most scholars focusing on its contemporary characteristics. They highlighted its new features, such as “promoting outward orientation,

implementing multilateralism, complementing globalism, emphasising ‘diversity’ and advocating ‘regional priority’” as responses to “new issues under new circumstances” (Zhang, 2009), thus differentiating it from *old regionalism* in terms of research focus, themes, and theoretical approaches. Entering the twenty-first century, as more scholars in China engaged with Asia–Pacific and East Asian regional cooperation, the concept of *new regionalism* was widely adopted. Given the international academic community’s push to move beyond the dichotomy of new and old regionalism and consolidate Comparative Regionalism, Chinese scholars began to recognise the need to transcend this dichotomy in their research.

The interrelationship among globalism, regionalism, and nationalism is a classic debate in both domestic and international regionalism research. This debate reflects significant conceptual and methodological divergences in understanding the interplay among global, regional, and national levels of world change. In China, there is a general consensus that these three dimensions involve strategic tension and interrelationship, where they both constrain and propel one another, with regionalism serving as a bridging mechanism. However, debates about their interrelationship persist, with current discussions primarily focusing on the interactions among global, regional, and national governance. The challenge of coordinating and balancing these dimensions is not only a theoretical issue but also a complex policy dilemma, which continues to provoke considerable debate.

The theoretical discussion of *Open Regionalism* that began in the Genesis Period sparked enduring academic debate. Initially, the debate focused on the fundamental cooperation principles of the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). It later extended to whether these principles should guide the construction of an East Asian Community. The ongoing controversy was linked to the confusion caused by the 2008 global financial crisis regarding the path and direction of East Asian regional cooperation. This led to a growing loss of confidence in the development of East Asian regionalism and contributed to the *declinist views* observed in the Plateau Period of RSC. It was not until after China hosted the APEC 2014 Summit that scholars began to feel a resurgence of Open Regionalism. Today, with the regionalisation of global governance, the interpretation of Open Regionalism remains an open academic and policy topic.

During the Takeoff Period of RSC, the academic focus primarily shifted to topics such as *the East Asian Community*, *comparisons of regionalism between Europe and Asia*, and *inter-regionalism*. Notably, the construction of the East Asian Community became a significant issue in RSC and also gained considerable attention as a policy topic among East Asian countries. Following the inception of the 10 + 3 mechanism and the East Asia Vision Group’s 2001 recommendation to move *towards an East Asian Community*, RSC began to concentrate on East Asian cooperation. The topic of *the East Asian Community* surged in popularity around the time of the first East Asia Summit in 2005. It became an intensely debated academic subject, with a wide array of perspectives and vigorous discussions, reflecting the comprehensive engagement of Chinese scholars with the issue. Since the 2013 Central Working Conference on Neighbourhood Diplomacy was held in China, discussions within the Chinese academic community shifted towards the building of a *Community with a Shared*

Future for Asia or a Community with a Shared Future for the Neighbourhood, leading to a prolonged engagement in discussions about the East Asian Community.

Comparisons of regionalism between Europe and Asia and *inter-regionalism* are two academically intensive topics that are clearly influenced by international scholarship but are also closely related to China's increasing emphasis on participating in regional and inter-regional cooperation. Both were hotly debated during the Takeoff Period. Since Europe is the most mature and developed region for regionalism and inter-regionalism, and Asia is the region where China is located, Chinese scholars have particularly focused on the comparative analysis of regionalism and inter-regionalism between Europe and Asia. They examined whether the *European experience* or the *European model* was applicable to Asian practices. While some scholars have noted the commonalities between the regionalism and inter-regionalism models adopted by Europe and Asia, the mainstream focus remains on their differences. This emphasis on the divergence between European and Asian models may somewhat limit the scope of China's Comparative Regionalism, since the ultimate goal of comparative study should be to learn from the European experience and examine whether it is suitable for Asian practice rather than treating the European *conventional wisdom* of regionalism mechanically. It is wise to advocate an eclectic approach; that is, Asia-Pacific regionalism should neither be regarded as a simple repetition of European history nor as a 'new' phenomenon based on an isolated history (Geng, 2003). Nevertheless, during this period, normative comparative analysis methods began to be introduced, including Comparative Historical Analysis, Comparative Case Analysis, and Comparative Institutional Analysis. These methodologies laid the groundwork for the subsequent comprehensive turn of RSC towards Comparative Regionalism.

Since entering the Plateau Period, academic discussions in RSC have become more nuanced and detailed. While discussions from a macro perspective, such as *the East Asian Order*, continue to be highly active and have been significant in driving theoretical innovation in Chinese IR, there has been a growing focus on more specific and practical issues. These include *the complexity of regional institutions*, the provision of *regional public goods*, and the development of regional *Connectivity and Interconnection*. These contributions have robustly countered claims of *declinist views* in RSC and are expected to continue advancing the field along these scholarly lines.

Existing Gaps and Future Directions in the Field

Despite these advancements since the twenty-first century, RSC still faces gaps that require reflection and improvement, as outlined below.

Firstly, there has been a tendency to focus on policy recommendations at the expense of theoretical development. Over the past three decades, RSC has produced notable theoretical achievements, including Processual Constructivism (Qin, 2009), Peripheral Development Theory (Wang, 1997, revised 2018), Extrastate-ism Theory

(Chen, 2001b), Structural Interaction Theory (Geng, 2003), Developmental Regionalism Theory (Wei, 2019), Dual Structure Theory (Gu, 2020), and Regional Construction Theory (Zhang, 2019). However, reviewing the RSC literature reveals a significant trend toward policy recommendations rather than theoretical exploration. The prevalence of empirical and policy-oriented articles persists, while those contributing to broad or mid-range theoretical discussions remain a rarity.

Secondly, indications of limited scope and fragmented research are apparent. This is primarily evident in the insufficient emphasis on regional socio-cultural cooperation and a lack of comparative analyses of regionalism in other parts of the Global South. Socio-cultural cooperation, which involves changes in regional knowledge structures and encompasses areas such as science and technology, education, popular culture, public health, environment, immigration, and cyberspace, is a crucial pillar in regional community building with substantial development potential that requires further exploration. Additionally, there is an excessive focus on regionalism in Europe and East Asia, coupled with a dearth of interest in regionalism in other Global South regions. This includes a lack of engagement with South-South interregionalism and its interconnections and comparative aspects, resulting in fragmented research.

Thirdly, there has been an emphasis on descriptive analysis rather than normative comparison. Much of the literature focuses on tracking and describing the historical process of regional cooperation and its current status, while systematic and normative comparative studies remain rare. Although some scholars during the Plateau Period have begun to focus on normative comparisons of regionalism, this focus remains insufficient. Moreover, compared to international scholarship, the output of Chinese research in Comparative Regionalism is notably limited.

Lastly, Chinese scholars often work in isolation, with insufficient communication, and a cohesive academic community in RSC has not yet been formed. Nevertheless, under my initiative, a group of scholars and publishers recently founded the Comparative Regionalism Roundtable Forum. Since 2021, we have held annual conferences at various Chinese universities and plan to continue this practice moving forward. Overall, researchers in RSC still need to strengthen their efforts to build a mature academic community.

Moving forward, RSC should leverage the accomplishments of the past three decades by incorporating international academic insights and experiences. It should adapt to the contemporary scholarly demands of burgeoning fields such as Global Studies and Area and Country Studies. Our endeavours should be channelled in the following directions.

A pivotal direction involves fostering a global perspective and devoting attention to the globalist orientation in regionalism research. On one hand, there is a need to strengthen historical studies from a globalist perspective. This involves continually uncovering historical patterns and local norms of regionalism while respecting the traditions of various regions in order to enrich our understanding of the global processes shaping regionalism. On the other hand, it is crucial to recognise that, in practice, achieving balanced development among globalism, regionalism, and nationalism is challenging. Special attention must be given to their *dark sides*, including various forms of populism and narrow nationalism, as well as de-globalisation and

de-regionalisation trends. Moving forward, RSC should emphasise the concepts of *regionalism under globalist scrutiny* or *global-regional governance* (Geng, 2021b), treating all regions equally and respecting the diversity, variety, and multilayered nature of global governance. This approach should focus on conducting large-scale empirical research related to global, regional, and national governance issues.

The other direction is to innovate theoretical construction and standardise research methods. In terms of theoretical innovation, we need to adopt interdisciplinary approaches from IR and Area Studies to propose new concepts, paradigms, and pathways. This will help bridge the traditional divide between Area Studies and social science theories. Regarding methodological standardisation, we should deepen comparative research on regionalism in Asia and other global regions, especially in the Global South. It is crucial to avoid any form of *centrism* and *exceptionalism*.

Additionally, it is crucial to align RSC with scholarly inquiries into the Global South. In today's world, the accelerated global transformation and the rise of the Global South are particularly notable, making related academic research a *hot topic*. Currently, the cooperation mechanisms within, between, and across regions of the Global South are diverse and active, with a multitude of cooperation mechanisms emerging. China has also engaged in various forms of interregional cooperation with the Global South, including China-ASEAN, China-Central Asia, China-Africa, China-Latin America and the Caribbean, China-Arab, China-Central and Eastern Europe, and China-Pacific Island Countries cooperation. Therefore, examining the cooperation within and among Global South regions from the perspective of Comparative Regionalism is supposed to become a key focus for RSC.

Conclusion

RSC needs both to clarify the existing research trajectory and framework and to plan future research directions and a blueprint. Moving forward, Chinese scholars in Comparative Regionalism should enhance academic exchange with the international academic community and align their research with China's participation in Asian regional cooperation and broader Global South inter-regional cooperation. This involves advancing both theoretical and empirical studies of Comparative Regionalism, driving theoretical innovation, and striving for the coordinated development and mutual prosperity of academic and policy-relevant research.

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Essay 9: Regionalism and the Role of Indigenous Populations in Big Ocean Striving States



Stacey Alvarez de la Campa

Introduction

In examining the role of Indigenous people of Big Ocean Striving States in regionalism, a foundational focus is to examine where these populations reside and the terminology used to describe these regions. The term that has been traditionally used, Small Island Developing State (or SIDS), presents a regional paradigm of vulnerability, inadequacy, and weakness, rather than a focus on the unique strengths and vibrancy possessed by islands all over the world, especially those that are deemed *small* and/or *remote*. Small islands, despite the many challenges they face, manage to succeed economically, socio-culturally, and stay connected. Therefore, throughout this essay, the term BOSS (*Big Ocean Striving States*) is used rather than SIDS in order to honour this vibrancy, resilience and strength.

The aim of this essay is to explore the concept of *islandness* as it relates to regionalism and the way that Indigenous paradigms can contribute to and enhance the concept of regionalism.

The essay is organised as follows: There will be a presentation of a conceptual framework that captures the specificities of island regions. In the subsequent section, the focus is on the Caribbean region and the role of indigenous peoples as region-builders, followed by a conclusion.

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_9

Conceptualising Islands and Island Regions: Islandness and Regionness

Islands across the world are often defined and identified/categorised in relation to their separateness and vulnerabilities, whether these are economic, social, ecological, or meteorological. Much of the literature that seeks to define the term *island* tends to focus on deficiencies and/or weaknesses, rather than capabilities and strengths (Briguglio et al., 2008, p. 11; Briguglio, 2018, p. 4). Even the constant reference to the *resilience* of islands comes from a starting place/paradigm of inherent weakness and intrinsic vulnerability. While these parameters are indeed linked to the definition of the term SIDS, this essay seeks to introduce a focus on the unique strengths and vibrancy possessed by islands all over the world, especially those that are deemed *small* and/or *remote*. Perhaps it is time for a different acronym, such as BOSS (Big Ocean Striving States)? The motivation to shift that paradigm is bolstered by Baldacchino's assertion that "a country can trade its island consciousness for alternative conceptualisations of itself; and these often imply a larger-than-life projection of the subject" (Baldacchino, 2015).

Some small islands, despite the many challenges they face, have the potential to succeed economically. Ronneberg (2004) outlines that this is due to a number of factors, including significant renewable energy resources that could be developed to reduce dependence on imports, thereby strengthening their economic and environmental resilience (Ronneberg, 2004, p. 168).

The socio-cultural strength of islands lies in the incredible diversity of the people who inhabit them, which is often due to the complex racial, ethnic, and sociological legacy of colonialism experienced by some island territories. Rather than viewing this as a negative characteristic, this cultural complexity can be viewed as bestowing a particular uniqueness to island cultural expression, adding to one of the strengths.

Another celebratory aspect of islands comes to life when we view the ocean through a lens of connectivity rather than one of isolation. Ma (2020) establishes that "...isolated islands are actually not isolated. People tended to consider islands as culturally isolated and thus neglected their openness and connections to the outside" (Ma, 2020, p. 4). Language is powerful, and language shapes reality. It is time to consider using linguistic determinants that focus on shaping a reality that will build up the possibility of a future for islands, a future that is not reliant on former colonial dependencies or unreasonable debt structures.

Foley et al. (2023) explore the perspective of islands being defined in terms of their positive attributes, examining the connectivity of water as a sociocultural force, as well as a cultural reality characterised by kinship and resourcefulness. Regarding water, the sea can be regarded as a conduit that connects islands through transportation and acts as a migratory pathway for all human and nonhuman living things. This majestic body of water also inspires artistic creativity, peace of mind, and renewal within those who inhabit islands (Foley et al., 2023, p. 1804). A resilient sense of community also distinguishes islanders from mainlanders (Foley et al., 2023, p. 1805).

Randall (2021) cites a particularly eloquent description of islandness as it relates to a depth of collective identity originating in a heightened sensory experience resulting from the combination of physical isolation, being closely connected with natural surroundings, and living in close proximity to neighbours (Randall, 2021, p. 5). The overall positive effect of this is that island communities overcome the challenging economic pressure to leave and strive to achieve success and quality of life.

Indeed, the ultimate rationale to consider embracing the designation of BOSS rather than SIDS is the fact that a collective frame of mind that focuses on vulnerability and smallness can be “damaging to...efforts to maintain viable countries, cultures, and livelihoods” (Kelman, 2018). Indeed, exploring such counternarratives of nomenclature provides levels of nuance, balance, and contextualisation (Kelman, 2018).

This reframing is in keeping with efforts to contribute to a reframing of the discipline of regionalism and to make it more inclusive and relevant.

Eurocentric conceptualisations of regionalism encompass a multiplicity of variations, most of which seem to be based on economic theory. According to Mansfield and Solingen (2010), there is a lack of consensus in relation to a definition. This lack of consensus stems from a lack of agreement on what can be regarded as constituting a region. It is often the case that regions are defined as groups of countries located in the same geographic space (Mansfield & Solingen, 2010). Other criteria include social and cultural homogeneity, shared political attitudes and political institutions, and economic interdependence. There has also been the emergence of the concept of a New Regionalism Theory (NRT), built on the foundational core of the concept of *regionness*, which is characterised by the multidimensional result of the process of regionalisation of a particular geographic area (Hettne & Söderbam, 2000). Regionness is also a more nuanced concept, as it centres on a historical and multidimensional perspective (Hettne & Söderbam, 2000), which can be considered to be especially relevant to the complexity of the aforementioned racial, ethnic, and sociological legacy of colonialism experienced by island territories in the Caribbean.

Islands, Indigenous Peoples, and Indigenous Regionalism in the Caribbean

In terms of the Caribbean, there is a distinct awareness of a specific region, with some shared cultural characteristics due to a similar distinctive region at a surface level. The Caribbean as a geographic area encompasses the islands and some mainland regions bordering the Caribbean Sea, and according to Britannica,¹ its southern borders are encircled by the coasts of Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama, and to the west by Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, and the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico. To the north, there can be found the Greater Antilles islands of Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico; and to the east, there is the chain of the Lesser

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Caribbean-Sea>.

Antilles stretching from north to south, consisting of the island arc that extends from the Virgin Islands in the northeast to Trinidad, off the Venezuelan coast, in the southeast.

While these islands themselves are considered to constitute a region, the same cannot be said today of the Indigenous communities who inhabit some of them, and who were initially responsible for regional coherence. The presence of Caribbean Indigenous people dates back to pre-colonial times, and there are some specific territories in the Eastern Caribbean that still possess a distinctive presence of the indigenous people who first inhabited their shores before the onset of European colonisation. What follows is an examination in tabular/chart format of some examples of the salient features of islands that are home to Indigenous communities. There will then be an exploration of the role of Indigenous people in the creation of the Caribbean region (Table 1).

The island of Dominica is home to a population of an Indigenous Kalinago community numbering approximately 2,000, and their history is quite well-documented (Honychurch, 1997). They also continue to thrive today, and there has been a focus on promoting awareness about and pride in Kalinago cultural heritage, especially among the youth of the Indigenous community (Hudepohl, 2008).

In contrast to the Kalinago people of Dominica, it is challenging to find information about the Indigenous people of St. Lucia. Some internet sources, such as minorityrights.org, allude to a Kalinago population that is primarily located in the Choiseul region, as well as in other towns on the west of the island. It is possible to find archaeological information (Reid & Gilmore, 2014) that refers to the ancient remains of Indigenous Taino inhabitants, as well as some information about Creole language and culture (Alleyne, 1961). By contrast, information about the living descendants of the Kalinagos is extremely scarce, and they are referred to as having been “wiped out” (Ismond, 1986).

In Trinidad and Tobago, while those of Indigenous ancestry only make up a small percentage of the population today, there is still a palpable linguistic, cultural, gastronomical, and material influence on modern Trinidadian society (Boomert, 2016). According to Trinidadian media outlets, those of indigenous heritage refer to themselves as the First Peoples of Trinidad and Tobago, and mainly live in the areas of Arima, Siparia, and Toco/Cumana.

The Indigenous people of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines are known as the Garifuna, and they predominantly occupy the northern, rural part of the mainland of Saint Vincent (Smith, 2016). They are exposed to multiple shocks and stressors such as climate change, poverty, and globalisation (Smith, 2016). The Garifuna were previously known as the Black Caribs (Smith & Barker, 2013) and are still haunted by the devastating legacy of European colonisation (Smith & Barker, 2013).

It is crucial to recognise the important role played by Indigenous people in the creation of what we now refer to as the Caribbean region. Hofman (2019) refers to the Indigenous Caribbean presence as being flexible, robust, and inclusive, possessing outward-looking systems. Furthermore, these systems demonstrated a

Table 1 Caribbean Island territories: Location, history, and geographical features

Name of Island Territory	Location in the Caribbean Region	Brief historical background & geographical features
Dominica	Located in the Lesser Antilles	Colonised by both France and England before becoming independent on 3rd November, 1978. It has a mountainous topography, featuring volcanoes and hot springs, and its highest point is Morne Diablotin, a mountain with a peak measuring 1,447 m. It is 47 km long and measures 26 km at its widest point
St. Lucia	Located in the Lesser Antilles	Colonised by both England and France. It gained independence on 22nd February, 1979. The landscape is mountainous and volcanic, and there is a distinctive ridge of mountains running through the centre of the island. There are famous hot sulphur springs, and Mount Gimie is the highest point of the island, at 959 m. At its widest point, St. Lucia is 23 km, and it is 43 km long
Trinidad and Tobago	Situated in the southeast of the Caribbean, 11 miles off the coast of Venezuela	The two main islands are Trinidad (the larger of the two) and Tobago, and there are also several smaller islands. The territory was occupied by both the Spanish and the British before it gained independence in 1962. Trinidad is home to a mountain range that is considered to be the geological continuation of the Andes, and this is one of three major mountain ranges. Trinidad measures approximately 4,800 square kilometres, and Tobago is much smaller, approximately 300 square kilometres
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	Located in the Lesser Antilles	Volcanic in origin, it is home to the active volcano of La Soufrière, which erupted most recently in 2021. The 31 islands that comprise the Grenadines are located to the south of the main island. Tourism is now the main source of foreign exchange and a way to provide employment for the population, and this was previously done by the agricultural sector (Bush, 2018). The capital is Kingstown, and the second main town is Georgetown. Saint Vincent was colonised by both the British and the French, and it achieved independence from Great Britain in 1979

Source Author’s elaboration

well-established resilience, as they are described as being comprised of a web of interlocking networks that spread across the region (Hofman, 2019). This can therefore be considered as an early example of regionalism.

Some of the scholarship in relation to Indigenous people and regionalism has been carried out, but not in an island-specific context. For example, Rice (2021) establishes that Indigenous regionalism in Bolivia and Ecuador weaves together

Indigenous peoples' territories across local administrative units and even national borders.

The previously mentioned criteria and defining characteristics of regionalism, namely, economic theory, groups of countries located in the same geographic space, social and cultural homogeneity, shared political attitudes and political institutions, and economic interdependence, have very little relevance to the current lived reality of Indigenous people in Caribbean BOSS. This lack of relevance results from the fact that these communities have endured historically high levels of geographic fragmentation and isolation, underscored by the intergenerational trauma of colonialism, the impacts of social and economic marginalisation, and extreme vulnerability to climate change and external economic shocks.

Examples of these aspects can all be collectively exemplified through the experiences of the Garifuna Indigenous community currently living in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, the community to which this writer belongs and regards as her ancestral home.

The Garifuna Indigenous People of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines have been referred to as possessing a unique ethnogenesis (Welch & Finneran, 2022), which results from the interactions between the original Carib population and the transported Africans who had escaped enslavement. These Africans came after escaping from nearby islands such as Barbados or after being shipwrecked along the Saint Vincent coast (Welch & Finneran, 2022). The cultural heritage of the Garifuna is a rich intermingling of African and Indigenous Caribbean components, which has created unique linguistic, musical, and artistic expression.

Early accounts by Europeans characterise the Garifuna as independent, family-oriented, and embracing a system of communal governance (Taylor, 2012). Their intrinsic connection to their landscape and environment is also noted by Taylor (2012) in his seminal work *The Black Carib Wars: Freedom, Survival, and the Making of the Garifuna*. Taylor describes the way that the Garifuna built their daily habits and sense of self on the foundation of the lush and rugged topography of Saint Vincent. He mentions that it was “uniquely conducive to their way of life,” especially in relation to the isolated bays and hollows, which provided privacy and protection. In his preface to Le Breton's *Historic account of Saint Vincent, The Indian Youroumayn, the island of the Karaybes*, Mark De Silva, the Vice President of the Mayreau Environmental Development Organisation describes the most important characteristic of the original Carib inhabitants of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines as “their love for; their total desire for, their obsessive craving for absolute freedom... when faced with the horror of being enslaved and the almost certain dispossession of their homeland, they did in fact become hostile. Thus, with the Carib nation united under the tactics of guerrilla warfare, they successfully held off the vastly superior European muskets and cannons with their bows and arrows for nearly 200 years” (Le Breton, 1998, p. 8).

The Garifuna were also referred to as *Black Caribs*, and their efforts to resist colonisation during the eighteenth century are evidenced by the two Carib Wars. These conflicts represent a pivotal moment in the oppression of the Garifuna at the hands of the British, as one of their most influential leaders, Joseph Chatoyer, was

killed. The resulting loss of leadership and subsequent defeat led to the meticulously conducted, genocidal wrath of the British colonial forces (Newton, 2014), who rounded up the emaciated, weakened Garifuna and exiled them to Balliceaux, one of the Grenadian islands to the south of Saint Vincent. Here, they experienced a staggering level of mortality, and it is estimated that approximately half of the 4,195 Garifuna men, women, and children died within a few months of their arrival (Welch & Finneran, 2022). In fact, Balliceaux is referred to as “a potent symbol of resistance, exile, death and survival” (Finneran & Welch, 2019) for the Garifuna people of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. From here, the diasporic experience of Garifuna identity continued to evolve, and the people who survived the holocaust of Balliceaux were sent to Roatan, an island off the northern coast of Honduras. Other members of the Garifuna diaspora can be found in Belize (Gough, 2022), as well as Guatemala, Nicaragua, and mainland Honduras (Oro, 2021); there are also Garifuna communities in the UK and the US.

It is important to bear in mind that the Garifuna of Saint Vincent have also suffered some extent of internal exile, both geographically and psychologically. The geographical exile occurred because those Garifuna who were not sent to Balliceaux managed to avoid this fate by escaping from the British and hiding in specific places on the island. These places are now the towns of Fancy, Sandy Bay, and Owia. The psychological exile has occurred because, according to a leading member of the Garifuna Heritage Foundation, it is still somewhat taboo in mainstream Vincentian society to discuss Garifuna history and identify as Garifuna.

The geographical locations of Fancy, Sandy Bay, and Owia have suffered the negative, combined effects of extreme weather events and drought over the past decade or so (Smith & Barker, 2013). These successive events have occurred within a relatively short space of time and have compromised agricultural production, household assets, and overall well-being (Smith & Barker, 2013). These shocks have economic as well as psychological consequences, resulting in what Smith (2016) refers to as feelings of demotivation and frustration. All of these factors, combined with the psychological exile referred to above, have the potential to be quite damaging to the sense of Garifuna identity for those who live in Saint Vincent and deeply compromise any potential sense of regionalism. Additionally, the presence of a Garifuna diaspora outside of the Caribbean serves to challenge any concept of Indigenous Caribbean regionalism.

It is also important to note that the Caribbean Indigenous community do not fit the current mould of the concept of regionalism from the point of view that their intangible yet deeply indelible spiritual and ancestral connections are ones that transcend and defy the confines of Western concepts of the space/time continuum. The resulting irrelevance of the Western concept of regionalism is further exacerbated by the fact that, as outlined above, Indigenous people have been historically displaced and dispossessed of their places of origin and have had to cultivate a sense of self, being, and community that is built on a foundation of collective ancestral memory and spiritual belonging that is not dependent on physical space. Again, this itself

can be considered to be a source of trauma and physical/psychological fragmentation, as Indigenous people form deep and abiding connections with their natural environments.

Conclusion

As it relates to regionalism, the concept of islandness seems to possess greater levels of nuance, as well as the ability to comfortably encapsulate seemingly contradictory concepts. These contradictions include vibrancy in spite of remoteness, vulnerability versus resilience, and unity while embracing cultural diversity. It is also significant that the Ocean is seen as a portal of connectivity within the realms of islandness, while regionalism focuses on land masses.

The Eurocentric frame of the concept of regionalism might well benefit from seeking to evolve greater levels of depth and flexibility and inculcate a more relevant theoretical approach in relation to Indigenous sensibilities. In order to build a foundation upon which to craft a more applicable conceptual framework for regionalism as it relates to Indigenous BOSS communities, it is necessary to develop a more holistic appreciation of the socio-historical realities and ancestral legacy of Caribbean Indigenous communities, through participatory action research and data collection exercises built on Indigenous research methodologies.

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Essay 10: The Latin American Forgotten Constitutional Precursor: Miranda's Regional Integration Scheme as the Geographical Dimension of Democratic Governance



Christian Ghymers

Introduction

One could say that, from a global perspective, Latin American countries have underperformed in terms of economic and political regional integration in recent years. However, they belong to the region endowed with apparently the most favourable factors for sustaining their integration: common cultural, religious, linguistic, and structural features should facilitate shared objectives and policies. They also conceived the first quasi-continental integration project, in combination with federal or confederal plans, more than two centuries ago. They even benefited from the most advanced constitutional project (1801) to form the most modern and largest democratic Republic Federation of the world at that time, written and proposed by the Venezuelan Precursor Francisco de Miranda [1750–1816]. Unfortunately, as History used to be written by the victors, this proposal was intentionally thrown into the dustbin of History.

Explaining the paradox that Latin America has not fully exploited its potential for integration deserves more attention from economists and historians. Without pretending to have a comprehensive explanation, our understanding, based on the analysis of the independence process between 1780 and 1826, points to drawing attention to the incomplete independence processes, limited to external decolonisation, without reaching an internal one through democratic emancipation.

Following this simplified view, this contribution proposes to rescue from the *dustbin of History* the alternative political path proposed by Miranda, which could

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_10

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have been taken at a crucial moment and would have been able to lead to a democratic integration.¹

Miranda, Bolívar, and the Struggle for Independence in the Late 18th and Early 19th Centuries

History is an inextricable mixture of determinants and singular events, so it might be helpful to try to identify the complex reasons why, unfortunately, the alternative orientation was not attempted. Opting to give key importance to singular factors, one might consider the tragedy of the saddest and dirtiest betrayal among patriots who sold their chief, Francisco de Miranda, the Precursor of independence, to the Spanish army in July 1812. This fatal event was instrumentalised by one of the three most active authors of the conspiracy, Simon Bolivar [1778–1830], allowing him to emerge immediately as a usurper of Miranda's leadership and, later, through his military merits, become the future and undisputed Libertador. Bolivar was a pure *Jacobin*, i.e. an adept of a political philosophy radically opposed to the pragmatic democracy shaped by Miranda.

Bolivar attempted to implement a geographical integration path within a Napoleonic centralist framework, resulting in an authoritarian *caudillismo* that generated violent opposition and adverse nationalist sentiments, ultimately failing to achieve internal decolonisation. The key historical fact to consider in any attempt at explanation is that Bolivar's usurpation hindered the implementation of Miranda's alternative project, rendering a factual comparison of results impossible. Still, the worst was the general reconstruction of history resulting from Bolivar's triumph—amplified with the Chávez regime since 1999, which has continued in Venezuela—throwing Miranda's constitutional principles into collective oblivion. Even today, it remains challenging to rehabilitate Miranda in Latin America and to make his quasi-continental visionary project known, a project whose many principles remain worth considering today.

Box 1: Who is Miranda (1750–1816)? The forgotten Miranda had a visionary plan of democratic integration, drawing on more than three decades of experiences on the ground in the three revolutions that shaped the Western world, as well as in political debates and diplomatic negotiations from 1780 to 1812 with almost all the governments of the US, the United Kingdom, Continental Europe, Turkey and Russia.

Miranda did not produce many theoretical writings as a man of action and diplomacy. His five successive constitutional projects for Hispanic America

¹ This essay is based on Ghymers (2025).

and one attributed to him for Brazil are among the most significant of his political texts, supported by an extensive exchange of letters. His constitutional proposals represent the most ambitious attempt to synthesise his democratic dream of constructing a new systemic governance capable of meeting the challenges faced in the decolonisation process of the heterogeneous peoples of Spanish America, fragmented by a caste system imposed by three centuries of colonial exploitation. Throughout his life, Miranda aimed to establish an independent, democratic representative system capable of decolonising entirely by generating external independence and essentially internal decolonisation based on socio-economic development through ethnic and regional integration. His innovative, integrative governance makes him a genuine precursor to an operational political economy philosophy that could not be implemented in Latin America for exogenous reasons. However, his ideas announced the main features of what the European Union tried to do two centuries later.

The primary purpose of most of his life was to establish the most appropriate way of governing a sovereign Spanish America, aiming to catch up with the Anglo-Saxon democracies through an original synthesis of these Anglo-Saxon and Latin/French cultures, while respecting local and indigenous idiosyncrasies. Although partially known to historians specialising in this period and topics, his constitutional texts were remarkably never thoroughly analysed, resulting in an underestimation of their innovative value and revolutionary potential.

Miranda's Constitutional Projects

With exceptional sobriety for this kind of text, these projects synthesise the essentials of the federal model of governance that Miranda proposed for Iberic America. This model may also apply to other regions and remains relevant today. This was an outstanding project, particularly in terms of its integration and intercultural ambition, its constitutional innovations in governance, and the extensive geographical coverage it achieved. It would have formed the most advanced democracy through social, ethnic, and geographical integration, achieving both external and internal decolonisation through socio-economic development.

These constitutional projects were written in 1790, 1797, 1801, 1805/06 (for Brazil) and 1808. They were contemporary with the first written constitutions in Europe, such as those in Poland and France. Still, they were earlier and more modern than the European liberal constitutionalism of the nineteenth century, which arose in Cadiz, Spain, as a symbol of the theoretical and practical fight against the old regime. The Spanish constitutional movement of Cadiz (1810–1812), which inspired constitutional texts for other countries, is significantly less advanced than Miranda's projects. However, it was conceived more than a decade later than those of the

Precursor. Although posterior to the US federal constitution (1787–89), Miranda's ideas were more advanced due to his preoccupations with organising collective goods to facilitate socio-ethnic integration and the importance he attached to economic development and political sovereignty. This demonstrates the advancement and great political maturity of the humanist general who formulated a pragmatic version of a more modern Democracy, which would have prevented the ideological manipulation of popular power he had observed in the French Revolution under the followers of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Jacobins. The five successive constitutional projects he delivered for Spanish America and the project for the Brazilian federation show that Miranda was the central axis of the conception and organisation of a long-term revolutionary strategy and a visionary promotion of modern democratic integration.

Unfortunately, being the loser of this struggle, most historians have reduced his role to a precursor of independence, neglecting his ability to formulate an operational synthesis of the most advanced ideas of governance of his time and, above all, to protect Latin America from Jacobinism by pragmatically adapting democracy to Latin American realities. Our interpretation is that having been defeated by *caudillismo*, the independence process remained biased, achieving only external decolonisation but being unable to achieve genuine emancipation, i.e., internal decolonisation, which was Miranda's essential purpose for independence.

He was looking for concrete formulas capable of channelling the conflicts and the social forces that would inevitably be released by the collapse of the absolutist Empire through resilient institutions that would monitor each other to ensure an effective separation of powers following Montesquieu. To translate it into an operational, institutional architecture, he was inspired, in addition to his deep knowledge of the Greek and Latin world, by three experiences:

1. positively by the British pragmatic equilibrium reached with its parliamentary regime and its *mixed government*, as well as his journey in the emerging republic of the United States, where his friendship with Alexander Hamilton connected him to the federalist ideas.
2. negatively by the French disequilibrium resulting from the lack of autonomy of the three constitutional powers due to the dogmatic principle of popular power extrapolated from Rousseau, leading him to conclude the need for controlling the inherent tendency of all political powers to abuse.
3. by the observed sociological need to build integration on an American identity by rescuing American culture's local and indigenous components.

For him, regional, social, and racial integration were linked and necessary for transforming political independence into a process of lasting external emancipation and sustainable socio-economic development. Written constitutions could only ensure this process by anchoring it in local and indigenous institutions and cultures.

These innovative aspects of his constitutions rely on the combination of the following principles:

1. Democracy comes from popular power, but it has to be limited to regular elections, which sanction the executive without interfering with its current management: *all from the people and for the people, but nothing by the people.*

2. The solution is a *mixed government* that prevents the excess of popular power by passing through a representative system, which limits legislative power with electoral (adjustable) filters and a combination of elected representatives with designated senators by the Head of the executive according to objective merit but submitted to the permanent control of autonomous *checks-and-balances* mechanisms.
3. The separation between the three branches of power (legislative, executive, and judicial) for preventing any disequilibrium through each watching the others in a permanent dialogue and with partial participation of the Head of the executive branch (Monarch or elected President) in each of them. His constant concern is to limit popular power to avoid *elective tyranny* if the three powers were controlled by popular assemblies, subject to the masses' emotions, which tend to empower caudillos.
4. The federal nature of the proposed regime distributes the powers and policy responsibilities geographically according to their respective efficiency in an adjustable way: in contrast to the prevailing views of his time (and especially the French ones) presenting federalism as opposite to democracy, his federal option points to developing a progressive integrative dynamism (absent in French thinking preoccupied with imposing a radical single *truth* in a *one-size-for-all* philosophy) which respects local identities while contributing to building awareness of common interests; Miranda's federal formula announces what will be named later the principle of *subsidiarity* and which will be re-discovered two centuries later; it combines strong powers entrusted to the federal level only when they are more efficient and more beneficial for all the regions, with the decentralisation principle for all other areas for preserving local autonomies and competitive dynamism. The frontier between federal and local powers is adaptable according to precise processes of qualified majorities, either initiated by the popular base or the top level, but always ratified by three-quarters of the legislative body.
5. The representative system is structured as a geographical pyramid based on direct voting, following the *Cabildos* (traditional municipal institutions), with successive pyramidal delegations made by voting representatives at the subsequent national and federal levels. His texts focused on protecting Americans from the risks of the tyranny-anarchy cycle (which he had observed in France) and the risk of geographic fragmentation due to geographical difficulties and the lack of communication infrastructure.

The Six Innovations Making Miranda a Precursor of Modern Multi-Level Democratic Governance, Which Found Sustainable Integration

Our analysis of Miranda's political texts suggests that he was a precursor of modern (multi-level) democratic governance in several aspects.

*The first precursory element was the integration of the heterogeneous peoples of Hispanic America through Law: A Federal Constitution shaped to ensure complete decolonisation, i.e., both externally (political independence) and internally (socio-economic emancipation). His recipe is to create institutions and collective goods for integrating, developing socio-economically, and educating the entire citizenry—Indians included—to achieve citizen freedom, thereby meeting the challenge of making sustainable a great federation of heterogeneous peoples that the colonial regime had segmented into castes and ethnicities to keep them subdued. The goal is to replace the colonial order with an autonomous, democratic system that fosters a progressive, socio-ethnic, and regional inclusion process. He aimed to eradicate ethnic, social, and religious discrimination to promote production and trade (i.e., socio-economic development) while preserving local autonomy. His innovative solution is based on his topical principle of geographical subsidiarity, which serves as a dimension of the separation of powers, thereby ensuring democracy. This principle radically opposes the French Jacobin rule of *one size fits all*. His federal constitutions announced what the three pillars of the European Union Treaty were trying to achieve two centuries later: strong federal powers but strictly limited only to three areas: economic and monetary union, external defence/diplomacy, and justice and Human Rights (electoral rules and fundamental common values), while all the other policies remaining decentralised for the realism of efficiency and for protecting the legitimate difference in local identities. Miranda's integration project was genuinely revolutionary.*

*The second revolutionary innovation—and the one that went most unnoticed—is the rejection of radical ideological principles that divide society, substituting them with the *relativist idea* that experimenting to warrant a pluralist debate allows society to freely find the most efficient path to form a consensus or at least a majority because, in politics, truth does not exist—only conflicting and changing value choices in the future. Miranda's fundamental democratic principle rests on a pragmatic anthropology that allows him to reduce it to a minimum of ideological postulates. Contrary to dominant thoughts from Plato to Rousseau and his followers, he did not rely on absolute rights. Miranda does not believe in the concept of *political virtue* in human beings but rather in their rational capacity to conceive and build an institutional system through written constitutions, which can limit political power through mechanisms of separation of powers and counterweights that allow these separate powers to control each other. Therefore, to prevent totalitarian or absolutist regimes, the constitution establishing a political regime must establish the basic rules that provide the tools for warranting free political expression and peacefully resolving societal choices. Miranda was the first revolutionary to apply the modern scientific method to the philosophy of governance progress. Scientific progress results not from ideologies but from open debates among the scientific community about the facts of experimentation and its possible errors or deficiencies. Accepting this in politics constitutes fundamental human progress by relativising the role of political ideologies, whose role must be limited to a value judgement, i.e., an explicit political choice that changes but is validated through open debates. This means that the choices of a free society must prevail over philosophical *truth*. This constitutes a total*

revolutionary break, not only in comparison with the old regime but, above all, with other revolutionaries and even the main current political movements. As in science, politics requires an open competition between changing views to reach a consensus or a majority in a peaceful, civilian manner. This approach reflects pluralism and the acceptance of evolving values and collective choices.

The third innovation is the extraordinary ability to combine the new fundamental principles of the Enlightenment and adapt them *to solve the universal aporia*, or systemic contradiction, between individual freedom and the interests of the community of all citizens. Miranda uses his empirical (scientific) method to conceive a novel synthesis—the first—between the utilitarianism of J. Bentham (the individualistic liberal thought that led to modern neo-liberalism) and the community natural law of J.J. Rousseau (the social thought that led to socialism and Marxism). His proposal was an empirical attempt to reconcile *freedom* and *equality* (or *fraternity*) by escaping from both Rousseau's prioritisation of community over individual rights and Bentham's prioritisation of individual liberty over society, thereby creating his own concept of *rational freedom*. It is an empirical principle that personal liberty cannot be defined à-priori but operationally by setting that it could not endanger the need for collective goods, making this individual citizen's freedom possible. This limit between individual rights and society's continuation cannot be fixed objectively and should be adapted to each context. Therefore, the recipe is an institutional order that guarantees permanent pluralistic debates, thus ensuring a *trial-and-error* process capable of self-correcting the errors necessary for socio-economic and human development. Miranda's recipe is empirical: allow, institutionalise, guarantee pluralistic debates, and take their moving outcomes only when supported by majority choices. To this end, the three constitutional powers must be on the same footing and have the means and incentives to remain autonomous.

The fourth innovation is how Miranda interprets the operational workings of the separation of powers, which supposes four postulates or conditions to function:

1. First, popular sovereignty, as claimed by the Enlightenment: the people's government is the source of authority that sets the legitimacy of institutions and their three branches of power.
2. Second, this power of the people cannot be confused with *popular power*. The political control by the people must be exercised only through a representative system based on regular elections; the people cannot govern directly (popular power) to prevent the legislative branch from imposing its power over the other two branches, as historical experience demonstrates without exception, always leading to totalitarian tyranny. Miranda wants to impede the abuses and tyranny resulting from the centralisation of powers. He wants a *government for the people, controlled by the people, but not directly governed by the people*. Direct democracy subjects the government and judges to popular emotions and violence, eradicating pluralism and freedom.
3. Third, people need to trust institutions and their ability to monitor the different powers in the general interest. Political authority necessitates an active role in

shaping public opinion, which implies the existence of independent counter-powers and effective education.

4. Fourth, the *axiom of the pre-eminence of fundamental human rights* over any other ideological principle also appears as a precursory innovation: A “*free government views all men equally...a homicide is always a homicide, whatever its origin. When you confuse your oppressors, do not imitate their tyranny.*”²... “*no man will be above [the laws] or will be able to transgress them with impunity; The poorest in the State will be under their protection as much as the richest.*”³

These postulates are neither dogmatic nor Eurocentric, as they are derived from history and Miranda’s personal experiences in the American and French revolutions, which convinced him of the necessity of limiting people’s sovereignty to prevent democracy from devolving into tyranny or anarchy. For Miranda, people’s sovereignty is undoubtedly the basis of democracy under the condition of respect for the strict separation of powers, which is only operationally workable if the people’s power is limited to judge and sanction the government only through regular elections, where legislative power should be absolute, although never for directly governing or interfering with the management of the executive or the Justice. In particular, he rejects the Rousseauian and Jacobin definitions of democracy, which are understood as popular power.

The fifth visionary innovation in his new governance formula is the emphasis placed on international cooperation. He proposed an international strategic *geopolitical alliance of democracies* against non-democratic regimes and the growing risks of expansion of totalitarian regimes, either absolutist or Jacobin.

The sixth innovation is effective *cultural relativism* and the search for universal principles without Eurocentric pretension. Indigenous components of American culture are incorporated into his governance formula. This innovation was not taken seriously and was even perceived by many historians as mere exotic folklore. However, this marks a considerable advance over the dominant, Eurocentric world of his time (which has not yet disappeared). Today, with the advantage of two centuries of experiences of abuse of the superiority complex of the old continent and excesses of radicalisation of its two ideological poles (liberalism versus socialism), Miranda’s humanist path continues to chart a timely path for strengthening democracy and for making realistic regional integration, adapted to each cultural context, while looking for what was later named multilateralism.

² Archivo del General Miranda. (1929-1950). Archivo del General Miranda (Vol. XVI, p. 119). Caracas & La Havana.

³ Proclamation to be issued upon landing in Brazil, 1806, in Salcedo-Bastardo, J. (Ed.). (1982). *América espera* (Document 132, pp. 351–353). Ayacucho.

Conclusions

A deep analysis of Miranda's political thoughts allows us to assess what Latin America missed when Bolívar betrayed him in 1812 and attempted to establish a *Napoleonic-Eurocentric* form of centralised regional integration. The opposed conviction moved Miranda's whole life, relying on two primary rules, making him a visionary precursor of what the European Union is trying to do after two centuries of mistakes and what presently China, Russia, and the US are trying to destroy:

1. Decolonisation of heterogeneous people requires not only external independence and geographical integration but also socio-economic integration based on respect for local cultures and policies, guaranteed by a federal constitution anchored in subsidiarity, favouring the progressive education of American identity.
2. Such a sustainable integration could not emerge from *popular power* or any absolute/dogmatic *truth*, leading always to *caudillismo* and Tyranny. Democracy means the opposite: a permanent fight to prevent the confiscation of people's votes by leaders exploiting people's emotions and violence. Emancipating heterogeneous people exploited by three centuries of colonial regime based on creating socio-economic divisions was a perilous project. Miranda's recipe was a genuine separation of powers, without any domination of one of them over the other two, even when popular elections result in *elective despotism* when the same group legally controls the three branches. Democracy requires pluralistic debates which respect human rights, a principle that is impossible to achieve when one of the powers controls the others.

These two basic rules of Miranda's political philosophy represent an innovative transposition of the scientific method to governance: to set pluralism was revolutionary because it was accepting an empirical search for the balance between individual freedom and societal interests; this *trial-and-errors* process is similar to scientific experiences: pluralism means to allow, institutionalise, guarantee pluralistic debates, and take their moving results only when supported by majority choices. This process requires strict rules to prevent it from becoming anarchy or tyranny. These rules are not dogmatic but merely extracted – not from Eurocentric ideas but on the contrary – from the reactions to European errors Miranda opposed and suffered personally, both in fighting the ideological imperialism of the French Jacobins and the maritime and economic Imperialism of British domination.

They remain all the more valid for today's world, where populism and *post-truth* threaten peace, democracy, integration, and multilateralism.

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Essay 11: Back to the Roots: 19th and 20th-Century Thinkers and Contemporary Latin American Regionalism



Fábio Borges and Andrea Ribeiro Hoffmann

Crear es la palabra de pase de esta generación. El vino, de plátano; y si sale agrio, ¡es nuestro vino! (Martí, 1891, p.15).

No hay que confundir el conocimiento reflexivo de lo ajeno con una sujeción mental a las ideas ajenas, de la que muy lentamente estamos aprendiendo a librarnos. (Prebisch, 1949/2000, p.14).

A primeira condição para liberar-se do subdesenvolvimento é escapar da obsessão de reproduzir o perfil daqueles que se autointitulam desenvolvidos

É assumir a própria identidade. Na crise de civilização que vivemos somente a confiança em nós mesmos poderá nos restituir a esperança de chegar a bom porto. (Furtado, 2000, p. 67).

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_11

Introduction

Knowledge production about regional¹ integration² in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) long predates the development of what we here refer to as mainstream perspectives on International Relations and Regional Integration. The reflections of scholars, intellectuals and political leaders such as Simón Bolívar, San Martín, José Martí, Euclides da Cunha and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, although not recognised in the literature of IR and Regional Integration, are extremely relevant for understanding the potential and limitations of the processes of regional integration in LAC.

The processes of independence and the formation of LAC nation-states, most of which took place in the first decades of the nineteenth century, involved discussions and disputes over borders and, therefore, processes of fragmentation and regional integration in relation to previous colonial political units such as the Viceroyalties of New Spain, Peru, Río de la Plata and New Granada, colonial Brazil and the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil and the Algarves. In addition to the independence processes, the global hegemonic transition from Europe to the USA, and US territorial expansion, especially the appropriation of Mexican territories, constituted a remarkable historical development for LAC cooperation and integration processes and their theoretical reflection.

From an academic point of view, the disciplines of International Relations (IR) and Regional Integration only became institutionalised in the second half of the 20th Century, mainly in the Anglo-Saxon world, and focused to a large extent on the two world wars and the European process of regional integration, and this perhaps explains the absence of the thinkers cited above as theorists in the field, who are read, if read at all, mostly in the disciplines of History, Sociology and Literature, in the LAC region. The mainstream IR literature rarely includes, for example, reflections by the aforementioned authors on the War of the Triple Alliance, in which Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil joined forces to fight Paraguay (1864–1870), or the War of the Pacific between Chile and Peru and Bolivia (1879–1883). Despite these silences, there is no denying that classical theories of IR and regional integration can contribute to understanding LAC regional integration processes, as long as we pay attention to the problem of *out-of-place ideas* and Eurocentrism, as inspired by the epigraphs of this article and the discussion by Amayo Zavallos (1999).

This essay explores the contribution of some of the authors who have thought about LAC regional integration and its historical particularities, both from academia and from intellectual and political life, with the aim of enriching the theoretical debate and complementing the knowledge production of mainstream perspectives

¹ Andrea Ribeiro Hoffmann acknowledges the financial support from the Brazilian National Research Council (CNPq), Productivity Scholarship (306,333/2019–8).

² We define regional integration here in broader terms, including bottom-up and top-down processes of interactions and cooperation among state and non-state actors that affect the establishment of political communities and regional institutions, and do not attribute a distinguished role for supranationality.

for a better understanding of the processes of regional integration in LAC. In addition to the above-mentioned authors, we highlight the perspective developed at the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the dependency theory, and decolonial perspectives, although the classification of specific authors in these schools is controversial.

Forgotten Authors from the 19th Century and Other Disciplines

The thoughts and life of Simon Bolívar and the debate between Pan-Americanism and Bolivarianism in the nineteenth century are emblematic in the thinking about regional integration in LAC, and Bolívar is perhaps the only author who is, marginally, included in the literature on Regional Integration, especially since the *revisiting* of his legacy by former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Bolivarianism was conceived in the *Charter of Jamaica* written by Bolívar in 1815, and at the Congress of Panama in 1826 and preached the union of nations on the basis of common international law; the creation of a league to try to resolve problems between the new Spanish-American countries or with foreign countries; the rejection of attempts to recolonise America; the abolition of discrimination based on origin and colour; the end of the slave trade and the opening up of Spanish-American countries to English trade. Bolivarianism was proposed as an alternative to Pan-Americanism, a concept of integration of the Americas promoted by the US and linked to the Monroe Doctrine. This Doctrine was enunciated by US President James Monroe (1817 to 1825) in his message to the US Congress on 2 December 1823 and advanced the non-creation of new colonies in the Americas; the European non-intervention in the internal affairs of American countries; and, the non-intervention of the US in conflicts related to European countries (such as wars between them and their colonies). Its precepts reaffirmed the United States' position against European colonialism, inspired by George Washington's isolationist policy, and developed Thomas Jefferson's thought that *America has a hemisphere to itself*. The Bolivarian Pan-American debate is reflected in the discussion about the space of regional integration, in particular the presence or absence of the US, and influenced the creation of the Organisation of American States (OAS) vis-à-vis LAC regional organisations and was revived during the leadership of Hugo Chávez in LAC regionalism, as discussed below.

Like Bolívar, José Martí also advanced original and radical thoughts about regional integration, with anti-imperialist and popular-democratic content, and also accompanied by a strong political praxis. Martí opposed US expansionism, given its direct intervention in the wars of independence of Cuba and Puerto Rico. He defended, in this work *Nuestra América* (1891), the need to overcome a *foreignism* (Europeanizing or *yanquizado*) that seemed endemic in the elites and in important segments of the Latin American peoples and that was expressed, among other things, in resorting to foreign models of political organization: "the European university must yield to

the American university (...) the history of America, from the Incas to the present day, must be taught to the letter, even if the history of the archons of Greece is not taught (...) Let the world be inserted into our republics; but the trunk must be that of our republics.” (Martí, 1891, p. 12). Martí advanced a national democratic political model in which a *common cause* was forged with the oppressed: the Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and peasants. He emphasised the importance of creation in the most diverse spheres of social and political life, against pure imitation, and the question of the unity of the peoples of “Our America,” against the “giant of seven leagues.” Casas summarises Martí’s ideas as follows: “In Martí, the projection of Latin American integration continued the Bolivarian project, albeit with its own characteristics. Martí inextricably linked the national democratic and popular project with Latin Americanism and anti-imperialism. Martí’s proposal to create ‘Our America’ from the roots of the people gave the longed-for ‘national unity’ a programmatic character that overcame old mystifications. Thus, since Martí, the Latin American nation is inseparable from a new consciousness of identity, affirmed in history, and from a new demand for rationality” (Casas, 2007, pp. 132–142).

Euclides da Cunha made a name for himself in Brazilian literature with his critical account of the civil war of Canudos in the northeast of Brazil in the novel *Os Sertões* (The [Brazilian] Highlands), published in 1902 (da Cunha, 1957), but he has a vast body of work on the Amazon region that has been ignored in the literature of IR and Regional Integration. In August 1904, da Cunha was appointed head of the mixed Brazilian Peruvian commission for the reconnaissance of the Upper Purus, with the aim of cooperating in the demarcation of boundaries between Brazil and Peru. This experience resulted in his posthumous work *À Margem da História* (On the Margins of History), where he denounced the exploitation of rubber tappers in the Amazon forest (da Cunha, 1922). Euclides left Manaus for the sources of Puru’s river, arriving there ill in August 1905, but wrote the essay *Peru versus Bolivia*, published in 1907 (da Cunha, 1975). da Cunha was visionary regarding the growing importance of the Pacific Basin and Brazil’s weakness in not having access to this geopolitically important region, which is now so prominent in the discussion about regional integration. The author sketched the route of a railway connecting Acre to the Pacific Ocean, passing through Peru, to be named *Transaccreana*, to achieve the following objectives: to distribute the (too centralised) population of the partner states of the Atlantic Ocean; to increase mobility in the Acre region; to militarise territories in danger of being lost to Bolivia or Peru; and most importantly – “this railway would bring us considerably closer to the Pacific” (Magalhães, 2005). Moreover, da Cunha argued that the railway would make transnational integration effective through physical infrastructure and that: “what should be seen in that railway is, above all, a great international road of civilising alliance, and of peace” (da Cunha, 2000, p. 84). da Cunha’s work dialogues directly with current discussions about the economic and security implications of regional integration in South America.

Sérgio Buarque de Holanda is another well-known Brazilian intellectual, but is ignored in the IR and Regional Integration literature. In the chapter *O Semeador e o Ladrilhador* (The Sower and the Tiler), from his seminal book *Raízes do Brasil*

(Roots of Brazil) of 1936, he analyses why the former Spanish colonies were subdivided into various republics, while Brazil, a former Portuguese colony, remained united and established a monarchy. De Holanda's work is key to understanding why Brazil and the rest of LAC "lived with their backs to each other" for a long time and the specific role of Brazil in the region, whose leadership and hegemonic capacity and desirability have not been the object of a consensus (Malamud, 2011).

ECLAC, Dependence Theory and Decolonial Thinking

The seminal article *The Development of Latin America and Some of Its Problems* by Raúl Prebisch (1949) provides important reflections for analysing the international insertion of LAC countries in today's world economy, despite the profound transformations undergone since then. The article's main argument is that, given the historical peripheral conditions of the insertion of LAC countries in the global economy, the State must foster economic development. This argument evolves from his thesis that, contrary to the theory of comparative advantages, during the twentieth century, the slower technical progress of primary products in relation to industrial products was leading to an adverse trend in the relative price of primary products. The explanations for this phenomenon are complex and contested, including the difference in price elasticity of demand for primary and industrialised products, and trade union organisation, which was more advanced in Europe compared to Latin America, which in turn had an abundance of labour and was dispersed and institutionally disorganised. Prebisch and other authors working at ECLAC, mostly in the 1950s, such as Celso Furtado, advocated state-led industrialisation of LAC and so-called *inward-looking development* as a way of reducing global economic asymmetries and the region's external vulnerability.

ECLAC's historical structuralist perspective remains relevant because it does not pretend to seek universal and timeless solutions but rather explores the specificities of each country and/or region in order to analyse precise diagnoses and proposals for public policies appropriate to each case. Since its creation in 1948, ECLAC has fostered regional integration and reflected on its implications, thus preceding the development of mainstream regional integration theories, such as neo-functionalism, which focused on analysing and promoting European integration. The central argument of ECLAC's perspective and Celso Furtado's thinking about the regional and the Brazilian context was that development would not be possible without a decrease in the region's economic and social asymmetries and the consolidation of national and regional markets on a larger scale so that industries could reduce production costs and be internationally competitive. This perspective influenced the creation of the Latin American Free Trade Association (ALALC) in 1960, which became the Latin American Integration Association (ALADI) in 1980.

In addition to ALALC and ALADI, other regional organisations have been created in the LAC region since then, influenced by ECLAC as well as mainstream perspectives. The literature refers to three historical periods. The first *wave* in the 1950s and

1960s was referred to as *closed regionalism*. Despite the vagueness of the concept of *close* mentioned above, the Central American Common Market (MCCA), the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM), and the Andean Pact were also created (Briceño Ruiz & Puntigliano, 2013; Bianculli, 2016). During the Cold War, Latin American regionalism was marked by the geo-politicisation of the region and US support for military coups against left-wing governments. In terms of development models, Chile, Argentina and Uruguay abandoned ECLAC ideas in the 1970s and adopted neoliberal strategies, while others, such as Brazil, maintained the role of the state in the economy and import controls to promote industrialisation until the end of the 1980s, although one of its pillars was increasing exports and attracting international capital (Gonçalves et al., 1998, pp. 76–78). These processes prompted the supporters of the ECLAC perspective inside and outside the institution to re-evaluate its proposals and explain the distortions of the industrialisation processes.

Scholars moved forward with this agenda, developing perspectives referred to as Dependency Theory, which emphasised the need for interdisciplinarity in thinking about economic development and the incorporation of the social question, which fostered the persistence of inequalities. The influence of social classes and elites on the associated and dependent international insertion of the region's countries into the international system was already discussed by founding authors of the discipline of International Political Economy (IPE) in the 1970s, such as Robert Gilpin (*The Political Economy of International Relations*, 1987), Susan Strange (*States and Markets*, 1988), Charles Kindleberger (*Power and Money*, 1970) and Klaus Knorr (*Power and Wealth*, 1973). Authors of the Dependency Theory, such as Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto (2004), Ruy Mauro Marini (1973), Andre Gunder Frank and Theotonio dos Santos, among others, incorporated the internal and external dimensions in their analyses to understand the insertion of LAC countries in the regional and international system, even if they diverged on the balance between agency and structure as well as on the role of the state and markets, configuring Marxist and non-Marxist variations of the dependency theory, but none were recognised and incorporated in the mainstream literature. These perspectives are still relevant to thinking about the role of elites and the permanence of domestic and intra-regional social inequalities.

In the post-Cold War period, LAC regional organisations were reformed or replaced, shaping a period referred to as the *second wave of open regionalism*, when the Washington Consensus and neoliberalism became the main reference for development policies. Organisations such as Mercosur and the Andean Community were also influenced by the European Union, especially its institutional design, including regional judicial systems, regional parliament and commitments to the rule of law, democracy and human rights. The institutionalisation of normative commitments such as democracy and human rights in regional organisations, and their role in promoting multilateralism at the global level, is still relevant today and provides a basis for the relevance of mainstream IR and Regional integration theories. Supranationalism, however, was never adopted in LAC regionalism, which is widely seen as

a form of strengthening sovereignty and autonomy from global hegemonic powers, with the exception of some judicial systems, such as in the Andean Community.

After a decade of trade openness and the adoption of neoliberal policies by various LAC governments, the poor results in terms of reducing social inequalities and, therefore, the development, contributed to the strengthening of social movements and opposition parties and a political ‘turn’ to the left with the election of governments, which revived the role of the state and developmental policies at national and regional level. A third period, referred to as *post-hegemonic* (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012), therefore, defined the years 2000–2010 when, on the one hand, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) was created on the basis of a development model based on 21st Century Socialism, and, on the other hand, the Community of South American Nations (CASA), the Initiative for the Integration of Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) were created, reviving elements of ECLAC’s thinking. Diversity in terms of development models in the region increased with the revival of proposals centred on trade liberalisation and the creation of the Pacific Alliance (PA) in 2012 and the Forum for the Progress of South American Integration (PROSUR) in 2019. This diversity has contributed to the political polarisation and eventual fragmentation of Latin American regionalism despite the survival of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean Countries (CELAC), created in 2011 as an umbrella organisation focused on political dialogue and common external representation (Briceño Ruiz & Ribeiro Hoffmann, 2021).

During the 2000s, in parallel with the strengthening of social movements and the left, decolonial perspectives became more present in the debates about regional integration, questioning Eurocentrism in the production of knowledge in LAC, in dialogue with post-colonial authors such as Edward Said and Boaventura De Sousa Santos, Aníbal Quijano (1998) and Walter D. Mignolo (2010). Decolonial perspectives criticise the economic influence on development thinking, whether in its orthodox, heterodox or even ECLAC’s perspectives; in terms of political economy, decolonial authors dialogue with radical ecological perspectives, cultural and political economy, post-developmentalism, and concepts such as *Buen Vivir* (Acosta, 2012). These perspectives do not foster particular models of regional integration but demand attention to economic and social exclusions, including those of original Indigenous peoples, and the necessity of regional integration from below; these perspectives remain relevant in the current phase of polarisation in the region.

Conclusion

The aim of this brief essay was to discuss the relevance of the thinking of some authors and theoretical perspectives that do not belong to the canon of IR and Regional Integration literature to the study of the processes of regional integration in Latin America and the Caribbean. We argued that despite the relevance of mainstream perspectives

to understand some processes and dynamics, there is a rich production of knowledge in and about the Latin American and Caribbean region that evolved since the 19th Century, and that must be incorporated in the literature for a better and more complex understanding of the particularities of the region and the creation, development, effectiveness and legitimacy of processes of regional integration. Several authors who were not included in the literature on IR and Regional Integration, as well as the thinking produced at ECLAC, dependency theories, and decolonial theories, have developed reflections and analyses that are complementary to mainstream theories of IR and Regional Integration, given their relevance for reflection on the specificities of integration processes in Latin America and the Caribbean. The field of Comparative Regionalism (De Lombaerde et al., 2010; Acharya, 2016; Börzel & Risse, 2016) is capable of building (meta)theoretical and methodological bridges between the production of knowledge from various regions of the world, including Africa and Asia, as well as the Americas and Europe, and is a fruitful space for this dialogue.

In conclusion, we advocate for the production of critical and innovative knowledge without disregarding what has already been produced by the mainstream in the areas of RIs and Regional Integration. This challenge would be well represented by the Epigraph by José Martí quoted at the beginning of this work and by the anthropophagy proposed in the Brazilian Modern Art Week in 1922, with one of its exponents, Oswald de Andrade, who makes an insightful provocation in the following poem:

Quando o português chegou
 Debaixo duma bruta chuva
 Vestiu o índio
 Que pena!
 Fosse uma manhã de sol
 O índio tinha despido o português
 Erro de português.

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Essay 12: Customs Union Proposals in Early 20th Century South America



José Briceño-Ruiz and Philippe De Lombaerde

Introduction

This essay shines a light on the debate that took place in South America in the early twentieth century on the desirability of creating customs unions (CUs) involving and centred around various countries in the region. Proposals were inspired by both geopolitical and economic motivations and were not necessarily implemented. However, the debates were important as they contributed to theorising CUs (long) before the publication of Viner's, 1950 *The Customs Union Issue*, as well as laying the foundations for the ideas about trade integration cum import substitution industrialisation as promoted by UN-ECLAC, followed later by ideas about new regionalist integrationist schemes such as Mercosur.

In this essay, we will first sketch the context within which these ideas emerged, and we will then pay particular attention to the underlying conceptualisation and (implicit or explicit) theorising that took place then. We will attempt to translate the ideas that were shaped and debated in early 20th-century South America in a modern economic language. This way, we will show the contribution of these – often neglected – ideas to the posterior theorising on economic integration later in the twentieth century.

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_12

Contextualisation

Regionalism is a long-standing process in Latin America. Already during the nineteenth century, several Congresses were held to create a Confederation, within the framework of which the countries of the region sought to create common mechanisms to deal with external threats. These initiatives have been referred to as a *Confederative Cycle* (de la Reza, 2012). These facts notwithstanding, in the nineteenth century, there were no regional initiatives by states in the field of economic integration, whether in the form of free trade areas or CUs.

However, some thinkers proposed initiatives in the economic field. In 1844, the Argentinian Juan Bautista Alberdi wrote a thesis entitled *Sobre la Conveniencia de un Congreso General Americano* [On the convenience of an American General Congress], in which he reiterated the logic of the first decades after independence to convene Congresses in the style of the one held in Panama in 1826. The one proposed by Alberdi, though, was not intended to deal with external threats but rather to promote trade and cooperation in monetary matters (see Alberdi, 1979; original work published 1844).

Andrés Bello also promoted the idea of greater economic solidarity among the countries of Latin America, and insisted that the latter, in their mutual relations with foreign countries, should reserve the right to grant each other more favourable terms and conditions than those accorded to other States (i.e. to extra-regional states showing a more advanced industrial development and greater maritime trade capacity) under the most-favoured-nation clause. This principle became known later as the “Bello Clause” (see, e.g. Barros Charlin, 1982, p. 118; Cave, 2006). Under the impulse of Bello, in his capacity of public official of the Chilean Ministry of Finance and later as senator, this clause was included in all the agreements Chile negotiated until 1845 (e.g. the Convention on Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation between Chile and the US signed in 1832) and was reflected in the treaties with neighbouring countries like the Treaty on Amity, Trade, and Navigation between the Republics of Peru and Chile which contains tariff preferences (Cave, 2006; Villagra Cayamana & Villagra Cayamana, 2013, p. 19). The principle of reciprocal preferentiality in treaty arrangements, as an exception to more general principles of equality and impartiality, was also incorporated in Bello’s famous *Principios de derecho de jentes* [Principles of International Law] (Bello, 1832, and subsequent editions). A century later, this principle resurfaced as art. 24 in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), signed in 1947, by which exceptions to the general most-favoured-nation principle were accorded in the case of free trade areas and customs unions. There is controversy on how and why this article was finally included in the text of the agreement, but it has been acknowledged that Chile and Argentina were among the countries supporting its inclusion (Haight, 1972, pp. 393–394; Mathis, 2002, pp. 37–42; Chase, 2006, pp. 7, 25–26).

In 1865, the Bolivian Benedicto Trifon de Medinaceli published the thesis *Proyecto de confederación de las repúblicas Latino-Americanas o sea sistema de*

paz perpetua en el Nuevo Mundo [Project for the Confederation of Latin American Republics: That is, a system of perpetual peace in the New World]. In this work, Medinaceli proposed the negotiation of a treaty on so-called *internal trade* (among the Latin American countries), which included other issues such as currency and common weights and measures. The proposal included the creation of a regional common market. An important aspect of Medinaceli's initiatives was that he outlined the idea of promoting industrialisation in Latin American countries through regional unity. Medinaceli proposed broad protection for national industries through internal customs regulations (see Medinaceli, 1862).

In 1885, Mariano Pelliza proposed the creation of a *Federación Social Americana* [American Social Federation], which basically rescued the idea of convening a Latin American congress to create a confederation (Pelliza, 1885). Pelliza proposed the establishment of a monetary union, a common system of weights and measures, the uniformity of import tariffs, the elimination of tariffs on intra-regional trade, the freedom of navigation and transit on rivers, sea and land, among other aspects (Rapoport et al., 2000, p. 1047).

The end of the nineteenth century was accompanied by the consolidation of the US hegemony on the continent. The Hispanic-American War and the increasing influence of the US in the Caribbean Basin were critical moments in the transition from the 19th to the twentieth century. Some years before, in 1889–1890, the US had convened an International Pan-American Conference in Washington with all the Latin American countries, in which proposals were presented on the establishment of a continental common market, deepened monetary cooperation, and the construction of regional infrastructure. Scepticism was voiced about these proposals by countries like Argentina and Chile, who considered that their trade with Europe could be negatively affected (see Briceño Ruiz, 2016; Morgenfeld, 2011). However, the Pan-American Conferences became the institutional framework for dialogue and elaboration of norms in the Americas in the following decades.

The arrival of the twentieth century was marked by US hegemony, but not without a reaction from the Southern Cone. The responses were diverging, though. Brazil, in the era of Minister of Foreign Affairs José Maria da Silva Paranhos Jr., Barão of Rio Branco, firmly supported Pan-Americanism to the point that US scholar Bradford Burns argued about the existence of an unwritten alliance between the US and Brazil (Burns, 1966). In Argentina, the response was quite different. On the one hand, the Argentine elites were reluctant to join an economic union with the US, which could affect their traditional relations with Europe. Additionally, the traditional commitment to liberal ideas, in particular free trade, began to be contested in some South American countries. The influence of Friedrich List's ideas on protectionism and industrialisation (see e.g. List, 2018, original work published 1841) began to be increasingly important in Argentina, Brazil and Chile. In Argentina, Vicente Fidel Lopez vocally argued in favour of industrialisation, followed by his student and later President of Argentina, Carlos Pellegrini (Frigerio, 1979; Popescu, 2014). In Brazil, in the early years of the Republic, figures such as Amaro Calvacanti and Serzedello Corrêa also fostered ideas on industrialisation (Salomão, 2017; Silva & Fernandes,

2003). In Chile, Guillermo Subercaseaux proposed a nationalist protectionism in (Latin) America (Subercaseaux, 1924).

Thus, at the dawn of the twentieth century and during its first decades, the regional scenario in Latin America was characterised by growing U.S. hegemony on the continent, especially in the Caribbean basin. Although Great Britain still had strong ties with South American countries, the US influence in this part of Latin America also grew due to the Pan-American conferences and the fact that the United States had become a global power after World War I. In the intellectual sphere, there was an increasing contestation of free trade and a reception of List's industrialist ideas. It is in this context that proposals for economic unification began to emerge.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the first movement towards economic integration occurred. List's idea of creating a *Zollverein* [customs union] was very significant at that moment, especially in the countries of the Southern Cone. One example of this was Francisco Seeber, who published the book *Argentina, Brasil, Chile, Uruguay, Perú, Bolivia y Paraguay. Estudios Comparativos, Geográficos, Etnicos, Económicos, Financieros y Militares* in 1903. In Chapter 1 of the book, Seeber made an extensive analysis of the German *Zollverein* to argue that the idea could also be useful for the South American countries. However, he also considered that at that particular historical moment in time, replicating the *Zollverein* in South America was (still) not realistic. Seven years later, in 1910, Francisco Pillado, Director of Commerce and Industries, published the book *Estudio del Comercio Argentino con las Naciones Limitrofes*, in which he proposed the establishment of a South American trade regime between Argentina and its neighbouring countries.

An interesting case is the so-called ABC Pact, promoted since 1905 by the Barão of Rio Branco, which intended the creation of a cooperation mechanism between Argentina, Brazil and Chile. The ABC Pact was eventually signed in 1914, and at that moment, the main goal of the three countries was to mediate in the diplomatic crisis between Mexico and the United States to avoid a new intervention of the latter in the Mexican territory. However, the Brazilian pundit Alberto Moniz Bandeira has argued that the ABC would facilitate the creation of a sort of economic entente among the three countries with the creation of a special regime of reciprocal concessions (Moniz Bandeira, 2014, p. 130).

One of the most important proposals of an economic union was presented by the Argentine engineer and economist Alejandro Bunge, who, in 1909, proposed the creation of a CU, which would include Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Paraguay. This proposal for a CU was linked to Bunge's critical thinking about free trade. In a paper published in the Argentine *Revista de Ciencias Económicas*, Bunge criticised free trade and defended the development of an internal market, with strong state intervention, as an alternative to an open economy (Bunge, 1929b; Lucchini et al., 2000, p. 153).

As an antecedent of what Prebisch and others would later describe as centre and periphery, Bunge divided the international economic system into *planets* and *satellites* (*astros* and *satélites*, in Spanish), the former referring to the developed countries and the latter to the developing countries. The policy recommended by Bunge

consisted of strengthening the satellites' autonomy from the planets by promoting industrial development through the creation of a CU (Asiain, 2021, p. 35).

This project was originally proposed by Bunge at the Municipal Theatre of Mannheim (Germany) in 1909. In his proposal, the CU would lead to a standardisation of tariffs "in accordance with the highest duties in any of those countries for each article, and future modifications would be adopted by a permanent commission. Products in competition between one or more of the signatories would be subject to a special negotiation, but the progressive reduction of the tariff would be agreed upon" (Gastón Araya, 2016, p. 18).

Although the proposal did not encounter fertile ground in political circles, in 1929, the Minister of Finance of Chile, Rodolfo Jaramillo Bruce, together with Eliodoro Yañez and Guillermo Subercaseaux, two officials of that country's Central Bank, joined Bunge in the idea of creating a Southern Cone CU (Quijada, 1993, p. 378). Subercaseaux proposed the establishment of a CU among a group of countries that would be "united among themselves by the ties of free trade and protected against industrial competition from abroad by a common customs tariff" (Subercaseaux, cited in García Firbeda, 1946, p. 123).

In 1931, Carlos García Mata, at that time representative of the Confederation of Trade, Industry, and Production of Argentina, presented at the fourth Pan-American Trade Conference a study about the possibility of creating a CU between Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay. Once again, the idea of industrialisation is part of Mata's proposal. He asserted that "[t]he countries that would form it [the customs union] have already reached the degree of development of their economies that requires them to abandon the system of production of a few raw materials for export to exchange them for manufactured products, to dedicate themselves to the integral exploitation of their rich geographical patrimony, and to the establishment of industries, necessary to supply the growing domestic consumption, provide work with a high standard of living for the national population, and acquire the desired economic independence" (García Mata, 1931, pp. 438–439).

That same year, in 1931, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Chile, Antonio Planet, proposed that the South American governments carry out technical studies to arrive at a CU. The Argentine Foreign Minister, Carlos Saavedra Lamas, also expressed in 1935 that "[...] in the face of the closure of the markets of the old European world, it is not difficult to predict, in my opinion, the emergence of large continental nuclei or divisions for the purpose of continental rapprochement [...] we would need to constitute a true economic unit" (quoted in Rapoport et al., 2000, p. 1048).

In 1940, the Argentine government presented the Pinedo Plan, whose objectives included the diversification of exports, the stimulation of trade relations with neighbouring countries, the reduction of tariffs, the promotion of greater rapprochement with Brazil, and the creation of a regional market to encourage industrial specialisation and the achievement of economies of scale. On October 6th, 1940, the Ministers of Finance of Argentina and Brazil, Federico Pinedo and Souza Costa, signed in Rio de Janeiro a series of recommendations to build a CU between the two countries. In November 1941, the foreign ministers of Brazil, Oswaldo Aranha, and Argentina, Enrique Ruiz, signed a trade treaty in Buenos Aires, later known as the Progressive

Free Trade Agreement. Afterwards, in February 1941, the Regional Conference of La Plata was held in Montevideo (Uruguay), with the participation of Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay. At the meeting, decisions were taken to facilitate freight traffic.

Economic initiatives were also promoted in the Andean region, such as the project to create the Great Colombian Economic Organisation (*Organización Económica Gran Colombiana*), carried out through the signing of the Quito Charter in 1948. This was an ambitious project to create a CU as a first step towards gradually and progressively achieving an economic union and to promote the industrial development of the member countries (Puig Arosemena, 1949). Similarly, Article 8 of the Quito Charter created a Production Commission, which was responsible for promoting the formation of producer consortia, or mixed-capital production corporations “for the establishment of new industries and the expansion of existing ones.” Likewise, the article promotes cooperation “in relation to common economic development, recommending the measures that are appropriate for the purpose of obtaining fair prices for their exportable goods” (Carta de Quito [Quito Charter], 1948, art. 8).

Conceptualisation

We now proceed with a transversal reading of the main texts and CU proposals presented in the previous section to distil the main concepts and pre-theorisations on CUs that have been incorporated. We will translate these early ideas using a modern economic language.

Complementary Production Structures and Inter-Industry Specialisation

One of the key arguments in favour of creating a CU is the existence of complementary production structures (especially in agriculture, thanks to diverse climatic conditions, and mining), which, in turn, allow for inter-industry specialisation and exchange when intra-regional trade barriers are abolished. Bunge (1929a, p. 684) expected to see an important expansion of intra-regional trade upon the creation of a CU, i.e. an important trade creation effect based on specialisation patterns, in turn based on comparative advantage. Sáenz Peña (1914, p. 348, cited in Solveira, 2001, p. 66) alluded to the economic complementarity of the Argentinian and Brazilian economies in 1909, Pillado (1910) to the complementarity between the Argentinian production structure and those of its neighbouring economies, Subercaseaux (1917, pp. 26–ff) to the complementarity between Chile and Bolivia, then adding Peru and Argentina. Bunge (1929a, pp. 680–681; 1929b, pp. 1079–1080) also referred to the complementarity between the production structures of Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay.

In addition, Bunge points to the importance of the reduction of transportation costs and time, due to technological developments, for the trade potential, in turn calling for a trade policy response (Bunge, 1929a, pp. 677–678; 1929b, pp. 1075–1076).

Import-Substitution Industrialisation

Long before the formulation of the link between regional trade integration, extra-regional protection and industrialisation at UN-ECLAC (see e.g., Moncayo et al., 2012), Subercaseaux (1917, pp. 26–29) already pointed to the beneficial effect of collective protection, via a common external tariff (CET), on industrialisation processes within the region. This is achieved thanks to economies of scale in an enlarged home market.

Common External Tariff and Trade Deflection

Subercaseaux (1917, pp. 39–40) explained the need for establishing a CET because, otherwise, trade deflection would occur with extra-regional imports being diverted to the CU member state(s) with the lowest external tariffs. In the absence of a federation, CU member states would have to formally negotiate and agree on such a CET.

Bunge (1940) suggested taking the highest tariffs in any country per tariff line as the basis for the CET, followed by its monitoring (and possible posterior downward adjustment) by a permanent commission. This choice for taking the highest tariffs was probably inspired by political-economy considerations, as it provided a way to compensate for the loss of intra-regional protection by respecting the highest external protection levels and, therefore, even increasing average external protection levels.

Pinedo, also in the early 1940s, took a different stance. For him, the intra-regional tariff reduction and elimination were more important than agreeing on a CET. On the contrary, for him, the non-harmonisation of external tariffs (in combination with the free circulation of goods within the region) would probably lead to competitive dynamics within the region, leading to the lowering of external tariffs (Pinedo, 1971, pp. 39–47, as cited in Solveira, 2001, p. 80).

Market Power in World Markets

Bunge (1929a, p. 681; 1929b, p. 1080) pointed to the fact that by forming a CU comprising Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay, for certain raw materials, market power would increase, and, in some cases, a monopoly could practically be achieved. These included sodium nitrate, linen, cereals, tin, copper, iodine, and tannin.

Nexus Between Trade Integration and Monetary Integration

Seeber (1903) suggested that the establishment of a common monetary unit could be a preliminary step towards the creation of a CU. In Subercaseaux (1917, pp. 29–30) and Bunge (1929a, p. 687; 1929b, pp. 1087–1088), it is argued that the introduction of a CU should be accompanied by a common currency or exchange rate stabilisation in order to reduce transaction costs and stimulate trade.

Political Economy of CUs

In Bunge's writings (1929a, pp. 683–684; 1929b, p. 1083; 1940, p. 290), he suggested that it would be politically easier to create a CU among countries that initially trade little compared to their extra-regional trade, as the CU would initially have a limited economic impact (although more importantly over time, given the trade potential) and a limited impact on governments' tariff income. Bunge (1929a, p. 684; 1929b, p. 1084) estimated the importance of intra-regional trade as a percentage of total trade at around 1.5% only (without transit trade).

A contrasting view was presented by Seeber (1903), who saw the absence of intra-regional trade rather as an obstacle to the formation of a CU. He recommended gradually reducing bilateral trade tariffs to increase intra-regional trade prior to the creation of a CU (see also Solveira, 2001, p. 68).

Further on the domestic political economy of trade integration, Subercaseaux (1917, p. 26) observed that the creation of a CU has the (political) advantage that it speaks to both the defenders of free trade (obtaining the elimination of tariffs vis-à-vis neighbouring countries) and protectionists (obtaining protection vis-à-vis third countries).

Trade Integration as a Gradual Accession Process

In the early writings on CUs in South America, one finds the idea that trade integration can be seen as a process of gradual accession of new member states, reflecting the fact that the conditions for joining a CU are fulfilled in different moments of time for different countries. According to Bunge, the *Unión del Plata* could be a starting point for a core CU, followed by the incorporation of Chile and Paraguay. de Valdivia (1924, p. 69, cited in Solveira, 2001, p. 70) considered different scenarios for such a process, with that of a core consisting of the ABC countries, gradually incorporating the other countries of the sub-continent, as the most feasible.

Other observers shared this view of gradual expansion, including Subercaseaux (1917), who visualised a CU initially formed by Chile and Bolivia and then expanding to Peru and/or Argentina. He warned, however, that a CU should consist of economies

of comparable development levels. It is therefore that he was opposed to asymmetric schemes that would include Latin American countries *and* the United States (Subercaseaux, 1917, pp. 43–44).

Conclusion

This essay briefly presented the debates on and the most important proposals for the creation of CUs in South America at the end of the 19th and mainly the early twentieth century. After sketching the international and domestic economic and political context in which those debates were taking place, the main ideas about CUs that they contained were translated into a modern international trade jargon.

While it is true that these proposals were mainly developed in South America, we are aware that some initiatives could also be found in Central America. However, these have not been covered in this essay. Having said this, Argentina and Chile *de facto* became the intellectual centres of those debates. In Argentina, figures such as Seeber, Pillado, or Bunge, and Subercaseaux or de Valdivia in Chile, fostered initiatives of economic integration in those years. It is not a surprise, as both countries were characterised by both a strong liberal tradition in the economic sphere *and* an important presence of nationalist forces. Argentina and Chile were the two Latin American nations that rejected the US proposal to create a CU in the first Pan-American Congress.

In these proposals, we observe embryonic ideas that, decades later, would be further developed by ECLAC, Prebisch, and others and become part of the Latin American contribution to the global political economy. Bunge's division of the world between *planets* and *satellites* paved the way for the centre-periphery dichotomy associated with Prebisch (who, by the way, was a student of Alejandro Bunge) and others. Similarly, another aspect that would be critical in the Latin American debates on economic development after WWII was the need for industrialisation and how regional integration in combination with extra-regional protection could contribute to it, as in ECLAC's proposals in the 1950s and the ideas to create a Latin American Common Market. One can again see clear echoes of the earlier proposals of Bunge, Subercaseaux, or even Medinaceli.

These and other ideas, such as those on the trade-monetary integration nexus, gradual accession to CUs, the problem of establishing the CET level, inter-industry specialisation, and the political-economy aspects of regional trade policies, were already clearly taking shape in Latin America, well before the well-known neo-classical or structuralist contributions of Viner (1950, see also 2013), Balassa (1961), Prebisch, and others. More generally, the case which is presented in this essay illustrates that when ideas are insistently associated with certain persons, ideologies and/or places, justice is not always done to history.

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Essay 13: New Strategic Regionalism, South-South Cooperation and Decolonial/DeWesternisation Approaches. Theorisation from the South with Applications to ALBA-TCP and BRICS



Maribel Aponte García

Introduction

The global origins of regionalism thinking are rooted in various theoretical frameworks that have evolved over time, reflecting different schools of thought and regional contexts. This essay highlights three essential frameworks that have either originated in the South as theorisations or regional phenomena analyses: New Strategic Regionalism (NSR), South-South Cooperation (SSC), and decolonial/dewesternisation theory (DdeW). These frameworks enhance the comprehension of emerging ontologies and theoretical perspectives in regionalism studies, particularly from the Global South, which departs from Eurocentric notions but is enriched by concepts inherent to these ontologies or their departures. The three frameworks have contributed or can contribute, to the analyses of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America – Peoples’ Trade Treaty (ALBA-TCP for its Spanish acronym), the BRICS bloc (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the BRICS plus (BRICS+) bloc, and to a comparative regionalism research agenda from the South.

The ALBA-TCP member states and their respective dates of incorporation are as follows. Founding members Venezuela (2004) and Cuba (2004), Bolivia (2006), Ecuador (2009), Nicaragua (2007), Dominica (2008), Honduras (2008), Antigua and Barbuda (2009), Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (2009), Saint Lucia (2013),

An extended version of this article (in Spanish) is scheduled for publication by CLACSO in 2025. I thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable and constructive feedback.

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Grenada (2014), and Saint Kitts and Nevis (2014). Ecuador withdrew from ALBA-TCP in 2018, and Honduras withdrew in 2010.

The term BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) was coined by Goldman Sachs in 2001 to highlight the economic potential of Brazil, Russia, India, and China in the world economy. South Africa joined the group by invitation in 2010, expanding BRIC to BRICS. In 2023, BRICS extended invitations to Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates in an effort to increase its global influence. Argentina and Saudi Arabia did not accept the invitation. In 2024, BRICS+ accepted partner members (not full members), including Cuba and Bolivia, both ALBA-TCP members. Venezuela was not accepted due to Brazil's veto, as a consensus is required. On January 1, 2025, BRICS+ admitted nine new partner countries: Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Thailand, Uganda, and Uzbekistan. On January 6, 2025, Brazil, holding the BRICS presidency, announced Indonesia's official entry as a full member of the BRICS+ bloc.

Why focus on ALBA-TCP and BRICS? These blocs present significant challenges to U.S. and European-led regionalism. BRICS+ comprises approximately 50% of the world's population and over 41% of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Furthermore, it exerts control over key strategic commodities, including hydrocarbons, grains, and minerals, offering new alternatives in energy, food, and finance, among other areas. Four ALBA-TCP members—Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua—have either been accepted as BRICS+ partners or have expressed interest in joining BRICS+. Lastly, theorisation from the Global South provides critical insights into one of the most significant developments in twenty-first-century regionalism, the BRICS+.

Regionalism studies have historically been shaped by Eurocentric frameworks that positioned the European experience as the universal model for regional integration. Early regionalism theories were grounded in international relations theory, which emphasised the role of supranational institutions. Scholars like Ernst Haas and Karl Deutsch viewed regional integration as a linear process inspired by the European Economic Community's (EEC) success. These models suggested that economic cooperation in one sector would naturally lead to broader integration across other sectors. This approach assumed that Europe's specific historical-political context, characterised by interdependent institutional frameworks, was universally applicable. This ignored the realities of regions with distinct sovereignty concerns and different institutional capacities. Later developments in international relations, with intergovernmentalism, shifted focus to states' strategic role in driving integration. Although this represented a more state-centric view, it still relied on Europe as the primary reference point.

Economic models of regionalism, influenced by international trade theory, emphasised the stages of integration, including free trade areas, customs unions, and common markets. Key proponents like Bela Balassa and Paul Krugman framed regionalism in terms of economic liberalisation, with the EEC as the archetype of successful integration. These theories presumed that economic integration

would automatically lead to political unity, a dynamic that was largely absent in non-European contexts.

The rise of New Regionalism Theory (NRT) in the 1990s marked a shift toward interdisciplinary approaches. Scholars like Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum highlighted the importance of social processes, shared identities, and regional *actor-ness* over economic or institutional considerations. They argued for understanding regionalism as a socially constructed process that varied across contexts (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000). Despite broadening its focus, New Regionalism retained Eurocentric tendencies, overlooking the intergovernmental nature of regionalism in the Global South, where political sovereignty and informal cooperation often dominated (Blaut, 1993).

Scholars have also identified other epistemological biases in Eurocentric theories. Geographical diffusionism—the assumption that European practices would naturally spread to other regions—has been critiqued for oversimplifying regional variations (Blaut, 1993). Others emphasise the need for empirical sensitivity and context-specific approaches to better address the complexities of Global South regionalism, which cannot be adequately captured through European-centric models.

These critiques call for theoretical pluralism that moves beyond Eurocentric assumptions to better account for heterogeneous regional experiences worldwide. De Lombaerde (2011) advocates for diverse theoretical approaches and rigorous empirical research to bridge divides, promoting interdisciplinary methodologies from political science, economics, and international relations.

New Strategic Regionalism

The term *New Strategic Regionalism*, introduced by Aponte-García (2014), posits that Latin America and the Caribbean were shaping an alternative form of regionalism, which emerged in the early 21st century as ALBA-TCP. What made it new was its articulation of a counter-hegemonic regionalism linked to strategic trade, endogenous development, sovereignty, and socio-economic policies.

The NSR consists of three key components: a focus on strategic enterprises and state-linked alliances in commerce and industry, a multidimensional approach that goes beyond economic considerations, and sovereignty-driven policies shaping regional activities. Strategic regionalism is rooted in the new international trade theory developed by Paul Krugman and Elhanan Helpman in the 1980s (Krugman & Helpman, 1985). This theory argues that introducing firms and imperfect competition into the international trade model renders trade patterns unpredictable (Mikic, 1998, p. 174), showing that the effects of free trade are often contentious. This led to the emergence of a theoretical framework supporting strategic trade and industrial policies to foster growth. States were encouraged to implement such policies to support specific firms and industries, developing what became known as managed trade. Strategic trade policy aimed to improve the competitiveness of domestic firms against foreign competitors, boosting economic welfare. International trade and industrial

policies, combined with path dependence and the advantages created by historical growth trajectories, explained the success of certain industries in specific regions.

NSR also builds on the legacy of dependency theorists like Andre Gunder Frank, Samir Amin, Raúl Prebisch, Clive Y. Thomas, Havelock Brewster, Theotonio Dos Santos, and Norman Girvan. These authors critique international trade theory, arguing that global capitalism exploits the periphery, creating structural imbalances and unequal exchange that block genuine development in the Global South. Aponte integrates these critiques to highlight limitations in conventional trade theories and the need for alternative regional integration models.

Aponte-García's research sought to conceptualise an ALBA-TCP model rooted in empirical findings and theoretical insights, advancing the New Strategic Regionalism (NSR) framework as a theory. The study's initial phase (2007–2009) employed mixed methods to critique open regionalism's free trade focus and results—trade deficits, capital flight, growing poverty, migration, and income inequalities—framing ALBA-TCP as a response to these failures. A case study of *Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)* demonstrated how state-driven enterprises could serve as tools for fostering domestic and regional development.

The second stage (2010–2013) mapped goods, grandnational enterprises (mixed public enterprises from ALBA-TCP member countries), and value chains within intra-ALBA-TCP trade. Findings revealed that ALBA's grandnational enterprises, such as ALBA-Food, prioritised strategic cooperation. During this stage, Aponte-García developed the multi-award-winning Chain-Business-Trade method to analyse value and supply chains in regionalism. This method became a core element of NSR, connecting value and supply chains, enterprises, and trade flows to address gaps in regionalism studies. Integrated trade and Bill of Lading databases were created using harmonised tariff codes alongside Broad Economic Category (BEC) classifications, linking trade flows to specific chain activities and firms. The third stage (2011–2014) marked the formal establishment of NSR, incorporating sovereignty as ALBA-TCP's response to energy, food, and finance crises. NSR builds upon but also diverges from traditional regionalism theories.

South-South Cooperation Framework

The conceptual foundations of South-South Cooperation (SSC) emerged in response to the systemic inequalities imposed by the colonial and postcolonial global order. The Bandung Conference in 1955 marked a historical moment in formalising principles such as anti-imperialism, mutual benefit, and non-alignment. This event laid the groundwork for SSC as a diplomatic and development framework for newly decolonised nations to challenge the dominance of the Global North (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000; Muhr, 2023).

During the 1970s, the SSC gained further momentum through initiatives like the New International Economic Order (NIEO). Scholars like Raúl Prebisch and Samir

Amin emphasised the structural inequalities embedded in global economic relations, calling for collective self-reliance and regional economic cooperation among Southern nations. Dependency theorists further articulated the need for Southern countries to overcome peripheralisation through regional strategies and economic integration.

The 1980s ushered in what Muhr (2023) describes as the *Containment* phase, as neoliberal policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank proliferated. These structural adjustment programs limited SSC by reinforcing dependency on the Global North. Despite this, intellectual advancements in SSC frameworks persisted, particularly through critiques of Eurocentric development models.

The early 2000s saw a resurgence of SSC in Latin America as progressive governments integrated SSC principles into their foreign and domestic policies. Scholars such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Arturo Escobar emphasised the *Epistemologies of the South* in redefining development paradigms. Grosfoguel's concept of epistemic delinking informed SSC's intellectual foundation, calling for the rejection of Eurocentric notions of progress (Grosfoguel, 2007). ALBA-TCP emerged as a flagship initiative, incorporating SSC into its social programs.

In the past decade, SSC has continued to evolve as a critical platform for resisting neoliberal globalisation and fostering multipolarity. Ojeda-Medina and Echart-Muñoz (2019) empirically analysed SSC's institutionalisation during this period, focusing on its incorporation into national and regional policies in Latin America. They demonstrated how Venezuela, Brazil, and Bolivia leveraged SSC to reclaim sovereignty, enhance regional integration, and tackle global inequalities.

Thomas Muhr identifies this phase as *Cooptation vs. Confrontation*, where SSC faces renewed pressures from global institutions attempting to assimilate Southern initiatives into Western frameworks through mechanisms like triangular cooperation (Muhr, 2023). South-South Cooperation has evolved into a robust framework for regional integration and global transformation.

Decolonial and DeWesternisation Approaches

Decolonial theory has played a crucial role in challenging Eurocentric epistemologies and advancing the inclusion of diverse perspectives from the Global South. Central to this discourse are contributions from Aníbal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, Enrique Dussel, Frantz Fanon, and Ramón Grosfoguel. Quijano's *concept of coloniality of power* is foundational, describing how colonial power structures continue to influence contemporary social, political, and economic systems (Quijano, 2000).

Dignolo builds on Quijano's ideas by introducing *border thinking*, emphasising the importance of knowledge produced at the margins of dominant power structures (Dignolo & Walsh, 2018). Dussel critiques Western philosophy, advocating for a decolonial turn in ethics that recognises the contributions of colonised peoples

(Dussel, 2016). Fanon's seminal work on decolonisation and the psychology of oppression explores colonialism's impact on identity (Fanon, 1952).

Decolonial researchers examine the intricate connections between coloniality and modernity, highlighting how colonial power structures have shaped modern rationality and advocating for an epistemic decolonial turn, supporting the inclusion of diverse, marginalised perspectives (Grosfoguel, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2008).

Scholars like Arturo Escobar and Ernesto Vives further enrich the application of decolonial thinking to regionalism studies. Escobar's work on post-development theory emphasises the need to reimagine development beyond Western paradigms (Escobar, 1995). Grosfoguel's critique of the North/South binary opposition and his call for understanding globalisation and modernity further contribute to applying decolonial theory to regionalism. Applying decolonial thinking to regionalism offers valuable frameworks for addressing the complexities of regional integration in the Global South, emphasising epistemic diversity and moving beyond Eurocentric paradigms.

Decolonial/dewesternisation theory dismantles the colonial matrix of power, creating new epistemologies and practices independent of Western modernity. DdeW critiques the coloniality of power and knowledge that underpins traditional regionalism studies, advocating for epistemic delinking from Eurocentric paradigms (Quijano, 2000). It highlights the importance of local knowledge systems and cultural identity in shaping alternative regional integration processes. The decolonial theory involves a deeper break from colonial structures, encouraging epistemic disobedience and alternative socio-economic models. This approach positions ALBA-TCP as a decolonial project, while BRICS embodies dewesternisation.

Addressing Conceptual and Methodological Gaps in Regionalism Studies

NSR, SSC, and DdeW expand the methodological toolkit for regionalism studies by incorporating innovative approaches that capture the complexity of Global South regionalism. NSR integrates the chain-business-trade method and historical case studies to examine the effects of strategic trade policies and state-led initiatives.

SSC employs participatory and comparative methodologies that prioritise the voices of marginalised communities, reflecting the horizontal nature of South-South collaborations. Participatory Action Research (PAR) engages local populations in co-designing development initiatives. At the same time, comparative case studies enable cross-regional analyses of SSC-driven projects, such as the New Development Bank's infrastructure programs and ALBA-TCP's social welfare initiatives. These methodologies emphasise inclusivity and adaptability, capturing the diverse realities of Global South regionalism (Muhr, 2023).

DdeW advances decolonial methodologies that critique the dominance of Western research paradigms, prioritising local knowledge systems. Ethnographic methods and

discourse analysis are used to explore cultural and historical dimensions of regionalism, such as ALBA-TCP's initiatives to preserve indigenous agricultural practices. Historical-comparative analyses further contextualise the evolution of decolonial strategies in regional integration, highlighting the differences between ALBA-TCP's anti-imperialist stance and BRICS' pragmatic approach to economic reform (Grosfoguel, 2007; Quijano, 2000).

Works on ALBA-TCP and BRICS Using These Frameworks

ALBA-TCP and BRICS as Cases of New Regionalism

New Strategic Regionalism emphasises the geopolitical significance of oil in Latin America, focusing on state-owned enterprises like Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) in advancing national and regional economic oil sovereignty. It analyses Petrocaribe, a Venezuelan initiative offering a regional oil alternative for small Caribbean nations and explores how oil revenues supported social programs. Strategic alliances within ALBA-TCP ensured energy security while reducing reliance on foreign capital and fostered regional cooperation through grandnational corporations and mixed public-private enterprises. New Strategic Regionalism also examines the creation and operation of Grand National Enterprises (GNEs) within ALBA-TCP. It highlights regional production chains linking member countries and the role of GNEs in increasing intra-ALBA-TCP trade. An original method for analysing commodity maps is introduced as part of this framework.

Applying its theoretical framework to food sovereignty, New Strategic Regionalism analyses policies aimed at achieving food self-sufficiency within member countries and the establishment of regional agricultural projects and food distribution networks. New Strategic Regionalism discusses ALBA-TCP's efforts to create a new regional financial architecture. It highlights the creation of financial institutions such as the ALBA Bank and the Unified Regional Payment Compensation System (SUCRE for its acronym in Spanish), both financial sovereignty strategies that strengthened regional integration.

Studies on new strategic regionalism as applied to BRICS are currently being developed by Aponte-Garcia (2024). Following research stages of ALBA-TCP, she has analysed hydrocarbon trade deflection under the Russia-Ukraine War within the China-Russia Strategic Partnership and BRICS, noting strategic diversification toward Asian markets as a response to sanctions and discussing how BRICS countries utilise state-owned enterprises to promote hydrocarbon sovereignty. Similarly, the strategic use of oil revenues and the role of national energy industries are highlighted as mechanisms for encouraging economic integration and hydrocarbon independence (Wilson, 2015).

BRICS is a strategic actor that fosters regional cooperation, enhances food security, and endorses an alternative international financial architecture. Future studies

will focus on food and financial alternatives within BRICS+. Reforms in global financial systems through initiatives like the New Development Bank and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement reflect BRICS's efforts to strengthen financial sovereignty against sanctions.

These works demonstrate BRICS's transformative potential in reshaping global economic and political systems while emphasising its role as a counterbalance to established global powers. Both BRICS and ALBA-TCP represent significant models of new strategic regionalism. These align with economic sovereignty, social inclusion, and regional cooperation principles, providing a foundation for comparative analysis.

South-South Cooperation Theory Applied to ALBA-TCP and BRICS

ALBA-TCP and BRICS represent significant models of SSC and new regionalism. Venezuela and Cuba, ALBA-TCP founders, have significantly contributed to SSC in Latin America and the Caribbean, rooted in Cuban developmental internationalism (Muhr, 2017). In 2006, Venezuela's contribution to global SSC was estimated at 18%, compared to China (14%), India (4.1%), Brazil (2.6%), and South Africa (1.4%) (as cited in Muhr, 2017). In absolute terms, Venezuela's volume was estimated at USD 1.166 billion, approaching China's volume of USD 2.172 billion, both higher than India's (USD 433 million), Brazil's (USD 365 million), and South Africa's (USD 100 million) (as cited in Muhr, 2017).

ALBA-TCP, analysed as an instance of SSC, experienced strengthening during 2005-2013, later affected by reduced oil prices and imperialist attacks aimed at breaking the Project, particularly after President Hugo Chávez Frías died in 2013 and Donald Trump's election in 2016. Social missions like the *Yo, Sí Puedo* literacy campaign and the *Misión Milagro* healthcare initiative highlight the alliance's commitment to human development and poverty reduction (Aponte-García, 2014; Muhr, 2017).

Revitalisation alternatives hinge on South-South Cooperation (SSC) among ALBA-TCP, China, and Russia, particularly through Venezuela and Cuba. These efforts aim to reinvigorate ALBA-TCP while fostering development, though they may involve environmental challenges from hydrocarbon and mineral extraction or the establishment of military bases. Since January 2025, Bolivia and Cuba have been BRICS+ partner members. Brazil blocked Venezuela's entry.

Strengthened South-South Cooperation (SSC) would position ALBA-TCP as a counterbalance to United States-led North-South regionalist free trade agreements in the region and against South-South initiatives that have been weakened by shifting geopolitical dynamics, such as the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), from which Venezuela was suspended.

BRICS is often highlighted as a model for South-South Cooperation (SSC) and regional integration. Its role in advancing SSC is widely acknowledged, focusing on trade agreements, regional collaboration, and strategic partnerships (Xu, 2020). Scholars agree that BRICS cooperation embodies a collective effort to challenge Western-dominated international institutions while addressing economic and political imbalances in the global order. Xu (2020) explores the theoretical and conceptual foundations of BRICS's evolving influence on global governance (Diko & Sempijja, 2021).

Innovative financial mechanisms are critical for monetary independence and economic autonomy. For instance, the Local Currency Trade Settlement Arrangement has been highlighted for its role in enhancing intra-BRICS financial stability and reducing dependence on external currencies. The establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) exemplify BRICS's efforts to reshape global financial governance (Xu, 2020). These institutions exemplify how BRICS fosters financial alternatives and promotes intra-BRICS trade.

Despite its successes, scholars acknowledge the significant challenges facing BRICS. Economic disparities, political differences, and varying national priorities among member states are often cited as barriers to deeper cooperation (Diko & Sempijja, 2021; Xu, 2020).

ALBA-TCP and BRICS as Cases of Decolonial and DeWesternisation Approaches

Only a handful of works apply decolonial/dewesternisation theory to ALBA-TCP and BRICS simultaneously: Al-Kassimi (2018), Muhr (2023), Chandran (2023), and Gürcan (2019). Al-Kassimi (2018) uses decolonial theory to emphasise the need to dismantle the colonial matrix of power and challenge Western modernity. This approach highlights the delinking from Western-centric models, promoting alternative development paradigms. Al-Kassimi sees ALBA-TCP as a more radical form of decolonial delinking, aiming to establish a socialist and anti-imperialist framework, while BRICS is perceived as pursuing a dewesternisation strategy focused on reforming the global order without entirely abandoning modernist growth-based economics. The initiatives of ALBA-TCP in social welfare and cooperative economics are contrasted with BRICS' pragmatic economic partnerships and strategic alliances (Al-Kassimi, 2018).

Muhr (2023) employs a historical-conceptual analysis to emphasise the transition from de-westernisation to decoloniality. His framework is built on understanding the geopolitical and socio-economic shifts in the Global South. Muhr examines how ALBA-TCP and BRICS operate within the shifting dynamics of South-South cooperation. He posits that ALBA-TCP represents a more comprehensive decolonial project, fostering regional integration based on solidarity and mutual benefit, whereas

BRICS is positioned as a dewesternising force challenging Western hegemony but remaining within the bounds of global capitalism. Alliances with China and Russia can strengthen both ALBA-TCP and BRICS against Western geopolitical pressures (Muhr, 2023).

Chandran (2023) adopts the theory of post-hegemonic regionalism, exploring how regional organisations can operate independently of dominant global powers. This approach examines the structural and geopolitical challenges faced by these entities. Chandran compares ALBA-TCP and BRICS by evaluating their efforts to establish alternative power structures that resist US hegemony. This author observes that ALBA-TCP is ideologically driven, emphasising socialism alongside anti-imperialism, while BRICS adopts a more pragmatic approach, focusing on economic cooperation. The discussion addresses geopolitical challenges both organisations face, such as internal political instability and external pressures from Western nations. Gürcan (2019) employs a geopolitical economy framework to analyse post-hegemonic regionalism, examining regional organisations' economic and political strategies to achieve autonomy. The analysis highlights ALBA-TCP's focus on social welfare and collective economic initiatives, contrasting it with BRICS' prioritisation of large-scale infrastructure projects and financial tools like the New Development Bank. Both initiatives seek to reduce reliance on Western capital and bolster regional sovereignty (Gürcan, 2019).

Conclusion

New Strategic Regionalism, South-South cooperation (SSC), and decolonial/dewesternisation theory address significant conceptual and methodological gaps in regionalism studies by challenging Eurocentric paradigms, redefining regionalism, and introducing diverse methods of analysis. The comparative analysis of ALBA-TCP and BRICS provides an understanding of South-South cooperation and regionalism, challenging Western dominance and fostering a multipolar and more equitable global order. Regionalism studies should embrace a pluralistic, comparative perspective that values the diverse trajectories of regional integration across the globe.

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Essay 14: Liquid Regionalism: A Conceptualisation to Understand Latin American Regionalism



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Introduction

The vast majority of analyses of regionalism in Latin America focus on three points: identifying the type of regionalism, discussing the crisis facing the regionalist case (or cases), and discussing a particular issue or policy from a regional bloc. This thematic concentration is explained by the tradition of trying to identify the movements taking place in the region, traditionally referred to as waves of regionalism, which leads to a multiplicity of labels and identifications that end up treating each process as a unique experience and, therefore, not comparable. This explains another characteristic of these analyses: the scarcity of comparative studies.

In a certain sense, the analyses that end up emphasising the positive aspects of integration tend to focus on partial studies (a particular case or policy), understood as experiences that have the potential to stimulate the deepening of the process as a whole, or that would signal some intention in this direction. Generally, these discussions are linked to current issues, such as the debates on the development of regional institutions such as the Andean Community General Secretariat, the Caribbean Court of Justice, the Mercosur Parliament, the South American Institute of Health Governments of Unasur, and many other regional bodies.

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Another explanation for this thematic concentration is the region's characteristic instability, reflected in regional arrangements that are constantly being reformulated, relaunched or replaced. Continuity is generally understood as a side-effect, i.e. something not actually intended but which would occur because there is a tradition in the region of not putting an end to these initiatives (Fawcett & Hurrell, 1996).

The idea of crisis is closely linked to this perception, creating a kind of recurrent cycle: there is a new wave of regionalisation that stimulates the creation of new processes. These new blocs stimulate a strong debate about their viability and contributions. Some factor, internal or external to the region, shakes the bloc and goes into crisis. Then, there is the return to the beginning of the cycle, with a new moment of stimulus that causes the revival of some existing processes or the creation of new ones, and so on.

This is why the term *waves* is used to refer to this movement of regionalism in Latin America; as happens in nature, they form, travel to the shore, and make a retreating movement. In the same way, some waves are strong and high, attracting the attention of those who observe them and dragging everything they find in front of them. Others are just ripples that create a certain amount of turbulence but are incapable of actually moving anything.

Thus, the idea of waves of regionalism in Latin America expresses the perception that processes are always starting over, with little capacity for consolidation and deepening. They represent some continuity, but this is due to their flexibility to adapt to new waves. The processes would shape themselves according to the waves, constantly adapting to new contexts. In this way, we concur with the idea that there are innumerable types of regionalism that coexist in the region (Perrotta & Porcelli, 2019), each one containing in itself both the characteristics of its creation and the adjustments incorporated throughout its existence.

Perrotta and Porcelli (2019) draw attention to the tendency in the literature to adjectivise the phenomenon of regionalism, especially when it comes to the case of Latin America. The problem with the *adjectives* approach is that this tendency tends to focus on characterising and describing the characteristics and general features of regionalist projects at a given moment, as well as paying more attention to the effects, developments and manifestations of these processes, rather than to what is intrinsic or structural to them, which would therefore contribute in a more explanatory way to understanding and explaining regionalism.

Our proposal in developing the concept of Liquid Regionalism (Mariano et al., 2021) was not to simply put forward a new adjective for the phenomenon of regionalism, but to highlight aspects that are more structural in regionalist dynamics, especially in light of the experiences in the Americas. In this sense, our contribution to the debate is to show that there is a conception of structural regionalism in the region that has been present in all waves with greater or lesser intensity and that sets clear limits to deeper regionalist processes, such as initiatives aimed at regional integration. We call this conception Liquid Regionalism. The first key point regarding the concept of Liquid Regionalism is that its emergence is tied to the absence of a prevailing regionalist model. In earlier periods, distinct frameworks—such as Closed, Open, Post-Liberal, and Post-Hegemonic regionalism—provided clear guidance for

regional processes. In contrast, the current lack of a dominant paradigm has brought to light the structural features of Latin American or Liquid Regionalism. These characteristics have always existed, but were previously overshadowed by the dominant models. We argue that the current regionalist moment is configured in a wave in which the lack of clearer regionalist models has allowed a liquid logic to predominate at the regional level in a more explicit way. In other words, the model that we call liquid regionalism reveals structural and permanent characteristics of Latin American regionalism that allow us to understand the consolidated difficulties of regional integration in Latin America. With this, we were able to show that despite distinct waves and promises of progress, Latin American regionalism has not overcome incipient and structural problems in its development (Mariano et al., 2024).

Based on this conceptualisation, we seek to contribute to the debate on studies of comparative regionalism, in the sense of moving beyond studies that describe regionalism over time, and therefore focusing on understanding and reflecting on the structural characteristics of regionalism in the Americas as a way of understanding the limits and possibilities of these processes. From a more practical and policy-oriented point of view, reflecting on the deep regionalist structures also makes it possible to develop more pragmatic policy objectives and a new institutional model that is more in line with regional realities. While in the first part of this essay, we recover Zygmunt Bauman's ideas on liquid modernity (2000) to conceptualise the notion of Liquid Regionalism, in the second part of the text, we focus on linking this concept empirically to the recent regionalist dynamics on the American continent, pointing out the contribution of this concept to the debates in the field of comparative regionalism.

Defining Liquid Regionalism

Inspired by Bauman's (2000) ideas about liquid modernity, we can identify the emergence of a period of greater fluidity in regional arrangements. Liquid regionalism, therefore, prioritises flexible and informal institutional structures, without the provision of institutional structures and a developed legal framework that supports the regional project in the long term. Furthermore, the initiatives of this period prioritise the autonomy of states by not requiring commitment to commonly agreed rules (Mariano et al., 2021).

The first point to emphasise concerning the concept of Liquid Regionalism is that its emergence is linked to the absence of a dominant regionalist proposal in force, whereas in previous periods, there was a model of regionalism that guided the various processes (such as Closed, Open, Post-Liberal, and Post-Hegemonic models). This unusual condition allowed the structural characteristics of Latin American or Liquid Regionalism to become more explicit. These characteristics were always there. But they were obscured by the dominant models.

In the case of Liquid Regionalism, we identify a distinct model characterised by some key aspects. First, there is a preference for more flexible and informal institutional structures that allow for less commitment and require less compliance.

Disobedience and the possibility of exit appear as inherent clauses of these arrangements. They, therefore, generate greater mistrust among participants and foster a perception of instability. As the level of trust or positive expectations regarding the benefits of participating in the bloc tends to be low, there is an incentive to *overlap*, thereby increasing the opportunities for gains without the need to deepen relationships.

At the same time, competition between regional processes reduces the constraints on participation as a means of maintaining their attractiveness. Commitments are linked to immediate benefits, while the prospect of future benefits is insufficient to attract or commit governments due to uncertainty and instability. Reducing obligations reduces the costs of participation and increases the range of benefits.

The above elements reflect Bauman's (2000, 2004, 2010) conception of post-modern society, which characterises regionalism as a 'fluid' phenomenon. This characterisation is not intended to make value judgments between different forms of regionalism, but rather to clarify the structural characteristics of the processes in Latin America.

The liquidity of a process is directly related to its tendency towards instability, which indicates less resilience. Bauman's reflection is focused on thinking about postmodern society and its implications, associating liquidity with social disaggregation. Since our subject is Latin American regionalism, our concern is to understand the aspects that explain the recurrent instability of these processes. Liquidity, in this analysis, denotes a situation with less resistance and response to external pressures.

We summarise the concept of liquid regionalism as a process of interaction between governments characterised by:

1. high flexibility and institutional informality;
2. low commitment and adherence to regional norms;
3. resistance to any form of institutionalisation that represents some form of restriction of individual autonomy;
4. the absence or fragility of institutional memory to promote organisational learning and serve as a basis for building a group identity;
5. low reliability among participants; and
6. an emphasis on short-term expectations.

The issue of organisational learning is important because it is a necessary element both for building positive expectations about the process and for sustaining commitments and increasing reliability among participants, thus strengthening group cohesion. This dynamic not only consolidates a logic of cooperation but also contributes significantly to the construction of shared values and a cohesive collective identity. On the other hand, it is undeniable that negative experiences, whether in terms of the results obtained or the behaviour of other actors involved, have the potential to slow down the collaborative momentum and reduce the level of commitment.

This aspect, centred on the interaction between experience, results and group dynamics, emerges as a crucial point in the debate on theories dealing with regionalism, especially in cases of regional integration. The discussion on the role of institutions finally represents the axis around which this reflection develops, as they play a fundamental role in shaping and regulating the interactions between the actors involved in regional processes, and can directly influence their effectiveness and sustainability (Acharya & Johnston, 2008).

When we refer to the question of collective identity, we are not thinking of the construction of a new *nationality*, but rather of the sharing of values, interests and objectives that make it possible to strengthen the bonds of solidarity between the participants (Riggirozzi, 2012). Without these bonds, cooperation between actors tends to be more superficial and fragile, especially as there is still a great deal of room for mistrust. All of this reduces the willingness to cooperate and honour commitments.

This does not mean that institutions must necessarily have a supranational character, as neofunctionalist authors suggest (Haas, 2004). It can remain intergovernmental. The central question here is not whether institutions have the capacity to impose or constrain behaviour so that participants feel compelled to comply with pre-established agreements. The fundamental issue here is the establishment of reliability, without which the tendency towards instability becomes stronger.

This is an important feature of Latin American regionalist processes. Because they generally have a reduced institutional structure and little capacity to constrain deviant behaviour, there is a strong tendency towards instability, which, in some cases, is mitigated by the presence of stronger leadership (Sanahuja, 2016). Some countries end up acting as compensators for institutional weaknesses, serving as guarantors of commitments.

However, there lies another weakness: when there is a polarised change of government, there is a tendency to disrupt this balance, as the new government tends to identify the leadership exercised by its predecessor as part of its political identity. In this case, the aim is to move away from or redirect this leadership, opting to give more relevance to another regionalist proposal or not to support any project at all (Barros & Gonçalves, 2021). This breaks the existing fragile structure of reliability and leads to instability.

Changes are part of the dynamics of any institution, as they are the mechanism that promotes the adaptations necessary for its survival. In the case of Liquid Regionalism, however, we have found that in most cases, these changes represent the inconsistency of members in honouring commitments and the instability of norms. Liquid regionalism is characterised by volatile actors whose interests and objectives are subject to change, which encourages low levels of commitment and a high possibility of withdrawal.

The interests and objectives that predominate in Liquid Regionalism are, therefore, short-term ones. As a result, commitments tend to be tied to immediate results or to specific circumstances, such as the political will of governments.

For this reason, it is clear that the intensification of the trend towards Liquid Regionalism is reinforced by the growing perception that more flexible institutional

structures are more appropriate. Short-term goals often reflect individual interests and condition group behaviour, neglecting long-term goals that are less tangible and distant, but less relevant to political leaders who are primarily concerned with national electoral issues.

The flexibility of norms becomes functional to this logic of regionalism. It allows for a low level of commitment and adaptation to current interests and facilitates withdrawal from participation, reducing the costs associated with a possible exit from the bloc. We then find processes that allow countries to participate without requiring the full adoption of regional norms.

Here, we open a parenthesis for a specific reflection that strengthens our argument. This problem of flexibility is not unique to Latin America. It also occurs in the European Union, with the United Kingdom's exit from the EU being the main example. Flexibility was used as a tool to maintain this member state in the organisation, as the rules were deepened and the British resisted their incorporation. In the long run, however, it contributed to a greater distance and its departure. We will not delve into what happened during Brexit (which is a much more complex process than the relaxation of the norms), but this reference is only useful to highlight how this aspect undermines the foundations of the regionalist process.

These aspects are related to the perception of benefits from the regionalism projects. The visibility of benefits is fundamental for building a political, economic and social base of support for regionalism. However, when the focus remains exclusive to short-term interests, the benefits are more likely to be limited to certain groups. This makes it difficult to raise positive expectations among other groups or sectors, especially if the reproduction of long-term benefits is uncertain. Such a situation can lead to an increase in negative expectations.

Finally, a last aspect to highlight about the issues surrounding the notion of Liquid Regionalism is that the institutional fragility of the regional experience in Latin America is linked to a concern for national sovereignty that prevents the adoption of deeper regional arrangements. Concerns about the loss of sovereignty on the part of national governments end up being a limiting factor in the process of deepening regional relations.

The mention of greater autonomy for regional structures has become something of a taboo. Regionalism—especially outside Europe—has been seen as an instrument for increasing autonomy, and therefore any move to limit it is seen as contradicting the central objective. However, it is not possible to deepen regionalist projects if the Member States do not give up a certain degree of autonomy. As Sanahuja (2016, p. 33) has rightly pointed out when dealing with regionalist processes in Latin America, "member states have chosen institutional designs that fit the objective of containing external influences in the region and fully preserving their national autonomy and sovereignty."

Liquid Regionalism is the logic of regionalism contained in the reasoning of these governments, although over time, it has been obscured by initiatives that have sought, with greater or lesser intensity, to adapt this logic to the prevailing regional models. We are currently experiencing a phase of Liquid Regionalism. In fact, this is the moment in which the nature of Latin American regionalism has been revealed,

given the absence of regionalist models as in previous decades and the lack of strong commitment on the part of regional leaders to invest in existing or new regionalist projects.

An awareness of the structural aspects of the processes developing in Latin America allows us to think about deepening comparative analyses between them, taking into account these variables but also reflecting upon their challenges. Liquid Regionalism poses a problem that needs to be addressed: it does not encourage the construction of adequate institutions for the development of a learning process that is necessary to build trust among the participants. Nor does it encourage the development of routines and behaviours that we consider fundamental for the construction of positive expectations on the part of actors in relation to the behaviour of others. Without these aspects, there is little likelihood of building shared values to support the development of mutual trust. In the next section, we will discuss these issues in more detail when analysing the effects of Liquid Regionalism in more specific cases, particularly in regionalist projects in the Americas.

The Effects of Liquid Regionalism on Regional Projects in the Americas

Liquid Regionalism, characterised by flexibility, low institutional complexity, volatility, and state-led initiatives, has increasingly shaped regional dynamics in the Americas since the 2010s, coexisting with and often replacing previous regionalist models; this shift is evident in the evolution of entities like CELAC, which, despite its post-liberal associations, demonstrates a transition towards liquid regionalism through its limited institutional design, reliance on voluntary norms, and susceptibility to political fluctuations and varying levels of member commitment (Sanahuja, 2014), ultimately highlighting the concept's relevance in understanding contemporary regionalism's fluid nature (Mariano et al., 2021).

The Pacific Alliance, while reviving open regionalism's trade liberalisation, lacked deeper institutional development and broader agendas (Bressan & Luciano, 2018; Briceño-Ruiz, 2022), contrasting with the USMCA's renegotiation, which, driven by Trump's protectionist stance, ultimately reinforced existing trade interdependence; meanwhile, more recent initiatives like the Lima Group and Prosur emerged as ideologically driven, volatile, and poorly performing alternatives to post-liberal regional projects, further illustrating the shift towards liquid regionalism characterised by flexibility and often limited impact.

The Lima Group and Prosur exemplify liquid regionalism's characteristics: both are state-led, minimally institutionalised, and highly responsive to immediate political contexts, primarily operating through ad hoc meetings and non-binding declarations; the Lima Group focused on the Venezuelan crisis, experiencing fluctuating membership and US influence, while Prosur, intended to replace Unasur, was

activated during the COVID-19 pandemic but quickly paralysed by shifting political landscapes in key member states like Chile and Colombia, highlighting the volatility and limited long-term impact of such flexible regional initiatives (Barros & Gonçalves, 2019).

In this respect, the lack of assertive regional leadership has been a chronic problem in Latin America, with key countries such as Mexico and Brazil regularly adopting strategies that distance them from the region. Countries often seem to compete with each other, neutralising rather than enhancing their capabilities. Latin America has regressed on several indicators, leaving states more dependent on external powers such as China or the US (Schenoni & Malamud, 2021). South America, in particular, has failed to provide effective multilateral responses to the crisis in Venezuela and the COVID-19 pandemic, which in turn has led to the stagnation of regional mechanisms. As a result, the region faces growing regional fragmentation and international weakness, with countries such as Brazil, Mexico and Argentina unable to coordinate a common agenda. The resulting pressure to empty existing regional processes has been one of the most striking effects of what we call Liquid Regionalism.

Conclusions

The aim of this essay was to summarise the extent to which our concept of liquid regionalism can contribute to understanding the contemporary dynamics of regionalism in Latin America, although some reflections may help us to understand other regionalist trends in the rest of the world. In this sense, we have highlighted the current tendency towards the *melting* of regionalist projects. Understanding the structural characteristics of Latin American regionalism makes it possible to recognise its limitations in terms of defining objectives and expectations of results. However, this does not eliminate the problem of instability in these processes. Firstly, internal instabilities continue to play a major role in regional dynamics; secondly, these structural characteristics discourage the logic of deepening and consolidating these processes. In summary, with this conceptual contribution to the understanding of regionalism in Latin America (and perhaps beyond), we have highlighted the growing observation of a vicious circle of liquidity: flexibility of regional projects leading to less stability, less integration/deeper regional commitments, which in turn leads to more flexibility of regional arrangements.

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Essay 15: Unravelling the Puzzle of Greek Regionalism: Balancing Between History, Reform, and EU Influence



Christina Minopoulou

Introduction

This essay on Global Regionalism examines Greece, a member of the European Union (EU), emphasising that regionalism transcends a strictly supranational framework or narrowly defined sub-regional micro-regions. Rather, Greek regionalism has emerged through interconnected forms, including hybrid cross-border micro-regions within the EU (De Lombaerde, 2010). The essay defines regionalism while considering both supranational and subnational dimensions, positing that the Greek case serves as a foundational element of regionalist thought. Instead of imposing contemporary regionalist theories onto Greece, it is more appropriate to acknowledge how historical developments in Greece have actively shaped regional governance. Greece has not only been a pioneer in democratic ideals but has also significantly influenced regionalist discourse, rendering its historical trajectory essential for understanding regionalism as a broader phenomenon. By exploring the evolution of Greek regionalism from the state level to its integration within the EU, this essay highlights the progression of regional governance over time and space. The history of regionalisation in Greece offers insights into the intellectual development of regionalism, shaped by historical transformations, administrative reforms, and EU policies. From the era of ancient Greek city-states to modern collaborative governance structures, Greece has undergone significant changes aimed at decentralisation, regional development, and economic stabilisation. Despite persistent challenges such as socioeconomic disparities and centralisation tendencies, the regionalisation process presents Greece with opportunities to enhance governance and foster collaboration in today's interconnected global landscape.

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_15

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The Historical Foundations of Greek Regionalism

Early Forms of Regional Governance

Both regions and regionalism—crucial to Greece’s historical trajectory—are influenced by geopolitical and economic forces (Elton, 2007). The term *regionalisation* typically refers to the establishment of administrative regions, where regional policy remains centralised under state authority. It can also encompass “broader societal integration within a region, driven by economic and social interactions rather than direct government intervention” (De Lombaerde & Söderbaum, 2013). In contrast, *regionalism* pertains to the development of regional institutions and governance structures aimed at addressing regional challenges and advancing policy objectives (Ioannidis, 2016; Kacowicz, 1999). Regionalism may also emerge as “a bottom-up process led by non-state actors or significantly influenced by private entities” (De Lombaerde & Söderbaum, 2013). This distinction between regionalisation and regionalism is crucial for understanding Greece’s evolving governance landscape, wherein decentralisation efforts coexist with broader societal and economic regional dynamics.

Regionalist thought in Greece, regarded as the birthplace of democracy, possesses a long and well-documented history rooted in ancient Greek civilisation (Giamarelos, 2020; Sealey, 1960). The concept of the *independent* ancient Greek city-state, or *polis*, represented a pivotal advancement and an early form of regionalism. More than a mere political unit, the *polis*, irrespective of its urbanisation, embodied a governance system with its own distinctive core (Melnichuk, 2015; Williamson, 2021). This innovation is critical to the intellectual foundation of regionalism, as it introduced principles of self-governance and cooperative networks among independent political entities. For instance, the collaboration among ancient Greek city-states is exemplified by the Olympic Games, which facilitated regional coordination and interaction, serving as an early form of regional cooperation and cultural exchange (Zhou, 2023).

Modern regionalism typically pertains to supranational structures; however, the ancient Greek *polis* system illustrates that the fundamental principles of regionalism, centred on administrative and political decentralisation (Hueglin, 1986), were evident in ancient Greece centuries ago. The role of the ancient Greek *unified state* in shaping the historical trajectory of regional governance during the archaic period is widely acknowledged. Prominent figures such as Solon and Cleisthenes contributed to the regionalism framework by emphasising the relationship between the populace or territories and their governing authorities (Sealey, 1960). These developments underscore Greece’s early influence on regionalist thought, positioning the *polis* as a foundational model for subsequent regional governance structures.

However, Greek innovation in regionalism did not cease with the city-state model. Throughout various historical periods, Greece experienced distinct regional governance structures that diverged from the feudal systems prevalent in Western Europe at the time. For example, during the Byzantine era (330–1453), regionalism was institutionalised through the *theme* (*themata*) system, which divided the Byzantine

Empire into military-administrative districts to enhance governance across extensive territories (Kaegi, 1969; Olster, 2012). This system reinforced regional identities while maintaining imperial cohesion, further demonstrating Greece's contribution to regionalist traditions. Under Ottoman rule (1453–1821), regional autonomy persisted through self-governing communes (*koinotita*), which played a crucial role in local administration. These autonomous entities provided continuity to the Greek tradition of regional governance despite the overarching authority of the Ottoman Empire. However, this multiplicity of regional power centres (*koinotita*) later complicated efforts to establish a unified national government during the Greek War of Independence (1821–1829) (Hlepas, 2015). The struggle between regional autonomy and national consolidation during this period further underscores the enduring relevance of regionalist structures in Greek governance.

Modern Greece: From City-State to Europe of the Regions

In contemporary Greece, early administrative reforms reflect elements of the ancient city-state system, indicating a historical continuity in regional governance. However, Greece remained highly centralised until the late twentieth century. The signing of the Association Agreement with the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1962 and full accession in 1981 marked significant turning points in regional development and administrative organisation. Despite these milestones, the centralised structures established during the post-Civil War statist era and the military dictatorship (1967–1974) persisted (Bache et al., 2010). It was only after the fall of the dictatorship that Greece's regionalisation process began to emerge, as EEC membership became linked to democratic consolidation and socioeconomic progress (Getimis & Demetropoulou, 2005).

While historical parallels are evident, Greece's regionalisation process has been influenced by a complex interplay of political, economic, and institutional factors, exacerbated by the pressures of European integration. Prior to the 1980s, Greek politics were characterised by hierarchical policy procedures, excessive legalism, over-regulation, contentious inter-party relationships, inadequate representation, and a weak civil society (Bache et al., 2010). This rigidly centralised system conflicted with the EEC's advocacy for greater connectivity among subnational, national, and supranational entities (Getimis & Demetropoulou, 2005), creating tensions between traditional governance structures and the evolving demands of regional policymaking.

Since the 1980s, Greece has emerged as a significant recipient of EEC and subsequently EU funds, which have been instrumental in advancing regional development through the partnership concept (Carlsson et al., 2022). Over time, the central government has gradually devolved regional development and political responsibilities to local authorities, fostering collaboration among local stakeholders and shaping regional development objectives (Ioannidis, 2016). Despite ongoing decentralisation efforts, the central government continues to exert significant control over

domestic governance systems and administrative levels (Tzika, 2020). Furthermore, limited civil society engagement and a heavy reliance on state-controlled interest representation institutions have hindered the decentralisation process.

Nonetheless, Greece's post-accession period within the EU has been characterised by initiatives aimed at transferring power, resources, and decision-making authority from the central state to the local level. These reforms emphasise municipal autonomy and regional self-governance, aligning with broader European principles of subsidiarity and democratic governance. This transition from a historically centralised system to a more decentralised structure underscores the continued relevance of regionalism in Greece, particularly in the context of EU integration.

Greece's Experience in the EU Post-Accession

Post-accession Challenges in Greece's Regionalisation

Following its accession to the EU, Greece's regionalisation process has been significantly influenced by institutional and policy changes associated with Europeanization. While EU objectives aimed at promoting regional cooperation and policy harmonisation have informed Greece's development strategies, the country has faced considerable challenges in the implementation of these changes. This is primarily attributable to its centralised institutional framework and pronounced regional disparities. Greece's attempts at regionalisation have been hindered by a political system that has struggled to adapt to the EU's decentralisation goals. Notable EU reforms, such as the Single European Act (1986) and the Maastricht Treaty (1992), were intended to enhance regional cooperation by reallocating political responsibilities to the EU. However, the incorporation of these reforms within Greece has progressed slowly, largely due to a fragmented administrative structure (Chatzopoulou, 2014). This fragmentation has resulted in what is referred to as *Europeanization inertia*, wherein Greece has encountered difficulties in executing reforms at the regional level, despite the presence of established legal and policy frameworks. The concentration of power within Greece's political system further restricts regional governance, as regional institutions remain subordinate to national authorities. This hierarchical structure limits their ability to operate independently and to align with the EU's decentralisation and integration objectives. These structural challenges highlight the obstacles Greece faces in aligning its regional governance with EU standards, as internal institutional weaknesses impede substantive regional reform.

Regional Disparities and Economic Fragmentation

Greece's endeavours toward regionalisation have been significantly impeded by enduring disparities, exacerbated by both internal governance challenges and external

economic shocks. The Eurozone crisis, for example, illuminated the uneven administrative capacities among regions, particularly in the southern areas, thereby complicating Greece's ability to adhere to EU regulations and effectively implement EU-driven regional policies (Chatzopoulou, 2014). The divergent levels of economic development, infrastructure, and education between urban and rural locales have resulted in a condition of *halfway Europeanisation*, wherein Greece partially adopted EU policies yet struggled to meet EU standards in local governance (Getimis & Demetropoulou, 2005). Moreover, these regional disparities have engendered friction between central and regional authorities, particularly concerning policy implementation and the allocation of EU funds. Despite receiving financial assistance from the EU, the equitable management of these funds across regions remains a challenge. Consequently, regional inequalities persist, with less affluent areas lagging in economic development, social welfare, and infrastructure, ultimately undermining the EU's initiatives aimed at mitigating such disparities.

The Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Regionalisation

The global financial crisis affected Greece's regionalisation process, exacerbating pre-existing regional disparities. Peripheral regions, which were already underdeveloped, experienced disproportionately severe impacts due to the uniform application of austerity measures (Spinthiropoulos et al., 2021) that failed to consider the varying levels of regional development. Furthermore, the Greek government's top-down fiscal response undermined regional institutions, thereby constraining their ability to address local challenges effectively. Although EU financial assistance facilitated Greece's recovery, the persistent effects of the crisis impeded regional development. Efforts to reform local governance in alignment with EU standards were delayed, as regional institutions continued to depend on central government decisions, which adversely affected the allocation of EU resources. This scenario highlights the broader challenges Greece faces in decentralising governance and empowering regional authorities to implement policies that are responsive to local needs.

Post-crisis Developments and Long-Term Regional Trends

In the aftermath of the crisis, Greece's regionalisation efforts have been shaped by EU pressures and internal governance challenges, with the *Europe 2020 Strategy* aiming to drive long-term recovery through job creation, innovation, and economic growth. However, implementation has been hindered by administrative inefficiencies and economic disparities, while climate change, demographic decline, and technological advancements have further deepened regional inequalities, particularly in rural areas. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of peripheral regions, emphasising the need for more adaptable, locally driven strategies. Despite these challenges, regional disparities also present opportunities for tailored development

by leveraging local strengths and addressing specific needs. Strengthening collaboration between local authorities, the central government, and the EU is crucial to ensuring that regional development aligns with local realities, fostering a more responsive and flexible regionalisation process within the broader EU framework.

In summary, Greece's post-crisis regionalisation has been shaped by institutional weaknesses, regional inequalities, and external pressures. While Europeanization has stimulated policy changes, obstacles such as decentralisation, economic fragmentation, and governance inefficiencies have hindered progress. In moving forward, Greece is actively engaged in efforts to fortify regional institutions, augment cooperation, and implement locally driven policies that align with EU objectives, aiming to establish a more cohesive and balanced development strategy.

Contemporary Regionalisation Initiatives: Administrative Reforms and the EU Influence

Greece's contemporary regionalisation process exemplifies an ongoing tension between centralisation and decentralisation, shaped by historical legacies and current political dynamics. Traditionally, Greece has upheld a centralist position within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the EU (Hlepas & Getimis, 2011). Nonetheless, recent reforms indicate a discernible shift towards decentralising governance structures. These changes, driven by the EU's Cohesion Policy (CP) and the Greek National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF), aim to enhance regional autonomy and improve governance effectiveness.

The historical governance frameworks in Greece, particularly those influenced by the French Napoleonic model, have complicated the implementation of decentralisation initiatives by constraining local political influence (Akrivopoulou et al., 2012; Kalimeri, 2018). Initially, Greece exhibited resistance to the protocol of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ECLSG) (Psycharis et al., 2015). However, EU policies, particularly the 1986 CP, have fostered decentralisation by promoting balanced regional development and mitigating regional inequalities (Nicola, 2011). Key administrative reforms, including the Kapodistrias Reform (1997), the Kallikratis Plan (2010), and the Kleisthenis Programme (2018), were instituted to further decentralise power and enhance local governance. For instance, the Kallikratis Plan established a multi-level governance (MLG) framework designed to transfer responsibilities to local authorities, although its implementation encountered substantial challenges (Akrivopoulou et al., 2012).

Despite these reforms, persistent tendencies toward centralisation continue to obstruct the full realisation of regional autonomy, thereby influencing Greece's regionalisation trajectory. The EU's CP and the NSRF have played a crucial role in Greece's regional development initiatives, incentivising reforms that align with EU standards and fostering regional cooperation (Pappas, 2024). The NSRF supports vital development programs and co-finances public investments aimed at diminishing

regional disparities and facilitating economic transformation. Nonetheless, challenges, such as a sluggish economic recovery and insufficient social discourse, have constrained the framework's efficacy, with the OECD assessing Greece's regional strategy as *medium* in its capacity to leverage community resources.

A pivotal aspect of Greece's regionalisation process is the newly examined transition towards collaborative governance (Minopoulou, 2022), which involves cooperation among national, regional, and local authorities as well as public and private stakeholders (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Bianchi et al., 2021). This collaborative approach, informed by democratisation and fiscal restraint, enables joint problem-solving and shared responsibility in addressing complex policy challenges (Chorianopoulos & Tselepi, 2017; Tzika, 2020). NSRF has facilitated collaborative governance partnerships designed to mitigate market volatility and enhance regional development projects, infrastructure improvements, and environmental sustainability initiatives (Minopoulou, 2022). Through the promotion of efficient integration and the reinforcement of the relationship between the state, local communities, and transnational civil society (Tsarouhas, 2006), collaborative governance has facilitated the development of a more sustainable model for regional development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Greece's regionalisation process has been shaped by a multifaceted interplay of historical, political, and economic factors, accompanied by significant internal and external challenges. While the country has achieved notable progress in decentralising governance, pursuing full regional autonomy is impeded by persistent centralisation, institutional fragmentation, and pronounced regional disparities. European integration, particularly through mechanisms such as the CP and the NSRF, has been instrumental; however, it has not sufficed to dismantle these entrenched barriers. Furthermore, prior crises have illuminated the vulnerabilities present in Greece's peripheral regions, as well as in Greece itself as a peripheral area, underscoring the pressing necessity for customised, locally driven policies to address these disparities. Despite these obstacles, Greece's regionalisation process offers valuable opportunities for more adaptable and region-specific development. To advance, Greece must address its historical centralisation by fostering enhanced collaboration between central and regional governments, empowering local authorities, and developing region-specific strategies. Strengthening regional institutions and aligning policies with both local needs and broader EU objectives can facilitate the establishment of a more collaborative, inclusive, and sustainable regional governance framework. Ultimately, adopting a responsive approach to regional development will enable Greece to navigate its contemporary challenges and promote a more cohesive and equitable model of regional governance, thereby contributing to long-term economic and social stability.

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Essay 16: From Empire to Cooperation: Transregional Organisations Among Former Metropolises and Colonies and Their Cultural Justifications



Giulia Ribeiro Barão

Introduction

Classical integration theory, rooted in European and Eurocentric perspectives, has faced criticism since its inception, with alternative frameworks emerging to address its shortcomings and expand regionalism studies. However, a specific type of regionalism, deeply intertwined with Eurocentrism, remains marginalised in International Relations and frequently neglected in the studies of contemporary regionalism. These are international organisations which emerged from former colonial relationships between European countries and their ex-colonies. Examples include the Commonwealth, the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF), the Ibero-American General Secretariat (SEGIB), and the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP).

Within geopolitical and interdisciplinary international studies, the few scholars who have analysed these regional processes created concepts like *post-imperial organisations* (Payne, 2002), families of *post-colonial nations* (Brysk et al., 2002), and *post-imperial communities* (Durántez Prados, 2014). These concepts highlight the historical continuity between colonial and postcolonial/post-imperial bonds, with domination patterns supposedly giving way to regional cooperation between former metropolises and colonies. They are understood as post-imperial strategies for composing transregional spaces based on cultural and linguistic identities.

This is one possible explanation for the less attention directed to these entities, as their focus on historical bonds, identity, language, and culture as founding pillars differentiates them from mainstream regionalism studies on commercial, economic,

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and security dimensions. Another factor to be considered is the low level of interdisciplinarity between IR and postcolonial cultural studies. While this intersection might seem challenging for a positivist epistemology, it aligns with reflectivist perspectives, like social constructivism and feminist theory in IR, which, like cultural studies, are interested in how discourses shape and are shaped by social reality.

Another possible reason for the overlook might be the difficulty of integrating these regional projects into any regionalism phases usually used for historical comparisons, such as the old and new waves, rooted in contemporary history after World War II. As post-imperial processes, they respond to an earlier pre-Westphalian logic, where regions can be traced back to empires, kingdoms, confederations, and other forms of coercive or voluntary political alliances and unifications (Söderbaum, 2015). Typical of empires, coercive integration often led to political unity and the spread of cultural practices, norms, and values, thus creating and imposing similarities among the different peoples under imperial rule (Söderbaum, 2015). This historical continuity suggests that post-colonial IOs should not be treated as anomalies but as critical case studies for understanding institutional persistence in regional processes and a set of regionalism practices.

Therefore, studying regionalism processes among previous metropolises and colonies requires an analysis of their imperial genealogies, even when these institutions were formalised in the 1990s, during the so-called era of new regionalisms, like SEGIB and CPLP. Most studies on these organisations come from sociolinguistics and language policy analysis, where focus is given to the politics of colonial languages—English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and others—and their continued supremacy in contexts of multilingualism. In this area, we find concepts like *linguistic spaces* (Massart-Piérard, 2007b), *geocultural organisations* (Durez, 2014), and *transnational phonetic spaces* (Ferra, 2007) used to define and compare different organisations influencing regionalisation processes based on the promotion of a colonial language, and which usually assume the International Organisation of La Francophonie as the typical case for comparisons.

They discuss how the spread of a conqueror's language has historically been a tool of territorial control, starting with the Roman Empire and continuing through European colonialism, with the imposition of the empire's language for administration and education, matched by active policies for marginalising, devaluing, and erasing Indigenous languages (Phillipson, 2012). Therefore, when analysing current processes of regionalisation based on linguistic policies between former metropolises and colonies, researchers aim to uncover and defy remnant patterns of language supremacy still in place under new political strategies (Erfurt, 2019).

While linguistic continuity remains a central element in their justification, we argue that these organisations also provide insights into post-colonial political strategies that transcend language, requiring a broader regionalism and IR analysis. Their institutional structures, governance models, and cooperative frameworks reveal deeper patterns of post-imperial adaptation that have been overlooked by mainstream regionalism studies, shaped by Eurocentric lenses that systematically evade critical reflection on their projects of post-imperial continuity. The fact that these organisations do not fit the traditional categories of regional integration needs to be addressed

critically, as more than a *conceptual cage* limiting the theoretical scope, but rather a convenient blind spot—one that sustains post-imperial adaptations by rendering them invisible, thus shielding them from critical scrutiny.

In order to contribute to filling this blind spot, this essay examines the common institutional features and discursive strategies of these post-imperial organisations, highlighting how their governance structures, cultural diplomacy, and historical narratives function as mechanisms of continuity rather than rupture. By doing so, it critically engages with the global origins of regionalism thinking, questioning how Eurocentric frameworks have shaped dominant theories and to what extent they act as ‘conceptual cages’ that obscure alternative regionalisation processes. Furthermore, it opens avenues for analysis on how post-imperial organisations challenge, adapt or reproduce these dominant paradigms, assessing whether their institutional logics merely conform to traditional regionalism conceptualisations or instead carve out distinct trajectories of cooperation that demand a reconceptualisation of regionalism beyond its Eurocentric foundations.

Foundational Discourses

On a substantive dimension, all four organisations give a central role to cultural diplomacy, broadly understood, to cover not only typical cooperation in the cultural policy fields but also the promotion of common historical narratives and values, such as solidarity, friendship, equality, and democracy. By doing that, they emphasised the *special bond* which justifies the historical continuity from coloniality to postcolonial relations (Brysk et al., 2002). These narratives emphasise continuity and shared identity rather than critically engaging with the legacies of colonialism. There is little to no reference to historical grievances, memory work, or reparative justice. Instead, these organisations construct a discourse in which former metropolises and colonies are portrayed as partners united by history, language, and culture rather than by a past shaped by unequal power relations.

There are also similarities in the vocabulary used to refer to the group of nations that each of these organisations reunites, with a preference for terms that reflect a sense of proximity and belonging. The Commonwealth refers to its members as a *family of nations*. The final Declaration of the first Ibero-American Summit in 1991 found the idea of a community of Ibero-American states. It was the same term chosen by the Portuguese-speaking countries when they founded CPLP in 1996.

Furthermore, these narratives extend beyond internal cohesion to serve external diplomatic purposes. By promoting their cultural and linguistic unity, these organisations position themselves as geopolitical actors that can influence international education policies, media industries, and migration patterns. For instance, SEGIB, CPLP, and OIF explicitly frame their work as a counterbalance to the global dominance of English, advocating for the expansion of Spanish, Portuguese, and French in international diplomacy, science, and education (Massart-Piérard, 2007a). This

demonstrates that historical narratives are not just rhetorical devices but also active components of contemporary geopolitical strategies.

The extent to which these cultural discourses translate into tangible cooperation remains an open question. While these organisations emphasise unity and shared values, do these narratives result in concrete policies that benefit all member states equally? Or do they primarily serve to reaffirm the influence of former metropolises? The tension between discursive inclusivity and institutional hierarchy remains central to understanding the role of these organisations in contemporary international politics, as we will see in the next section.

Institutional Structures

Beyond their similar imperial genealogies and justifications, the Commonwealth, OIF, SEGIB and CPLP also hold similar institutional structures. In general, their highest authority is the Summit of Heads of State and Government, which meets annually or biannually and is preceded by Conferences of Ministers on the sectoral areas of cooperation covered by the member states. The Summits are hosted by *pro tempore* presidencies, which rotate among the Member states, giving the positive appearance of equal participation and shared leadership among member states. However, an interesting question for analysis is whether this structure truly enables democratic decision-making or if, in practice, the ability to shape final decisions depends on which members have the economic and technical resources necessary to implement projects and programs. This raises further inquiries into whether former metropolises and economically stronger member states hold a disproportionate influence over the organisation's agenda, subtly guiding cooperation priorities despite the formal structure of multilateralism.

To organise conferences, summits, and cooperation initiatives, member states involved in these regionalism processes eventually agreed on the need to establish international secretariats. These secretariats function as permanent bodies with their own budgets, international staff, and a secretary, similar in role to the United Nations Secretariat. Secretaries manage the day-to-day operations of the organisation, including overseeing staff, budget, and resources, ensuring that various departments and programs work cohesively, and implementing policies decided by member states. Externally, they must represent the organisation in international forums, advocate for its values and objectives on the global stage and serve as the main liaison between the organisation and its member states, facilitating communication and cooperation. Although with different systems and forms of appointment, the nationality of Secretariats rotates among the Member States in all cases noted; however, the Secretariats' headquarters are all located in the capital cities of former metropolises: the Commonwealth, in London; SEGIB, in Madrid; CPLP, in Lisbon; and OIF, in Paris.

This raises questions about the structural persistence of metropolitan influence. Despite claims of serving diverse populations, these organisations are institutionally

embedded in historical power centres, maintaining stronger ties with the national governments of the territory in which they are located, their local elites, and diplomatic networks rather than with the broader communities they represent. Does the continued presence of headquarters in former metropolises consolidate their historical centrality in decision-making, or is it merely a logistical convenience? Furthermore, how do these locations shape the political culture, hiring practices, and policy priorities of the organisations? These elements point out tensions between the symbolic weight of decolonisation and the practical realities of institutional power distribution.

In terms of their composition, while the metropolis-colonial tie is still central to all our examples, there is an interest in expanding membership, which is observable in all examples we analyse here, although with different levels of openness. The Commonwealth already accepts members who have never been under the British Empire. The OIF currently refers to itself as the gathering of men and women who speak French around the world, which indicates the organisation's trend towards an expansion beyond countries formerly colonised by France and a focus on the dissemination of the French language. Differently, SEGIB membership rules limit its composition to those countries colonised by Spain and Portugal in Latin America and the Caribbean, and CPLP to countries in all continents with historical ties to Portugal and Portuguese as their official language. However, both organisations have been expanding the participation of other States, international organisations, and civil society organisations through figures such as observers or associates. In all cases, there is a recognised willingness to act as a relevant voice in the international scenario, which means expanding partnerships and membership when needed. This trend is an important level of analysis, opening ways to question how much each of these organisations remains post-imperial in their composition and to what extent they have changed, if so.

Why Do These Organisations Exist if They Are Post-Imperial Power Projects?

Another level of analysis to understand the role of these organisations in current international politics should try to identify the motivations behind the creation of both former metropolises and colonies. Existing arguments for their creation vary, although some explanations are consistently mentioned, such as ex-metropolis holding on to *imperial nostalgias*, a term framed by Rosaldo (1989), indicating how former European imperial powers tend to incorporate their former colonies as part of their national identity (Sousa & Downey, 2018) and as a source of historical legitimacy and prestige in the international arena. In one of a few comparative regionalism studies focusing on post-imperial regionalism projects, Brysk et al. (2002) bring relevant data to show how Spain, France, and Britain have continued to prioritise, or at least value, their relationships with former colonies, even though their economic and

strategic significance had diminished, thus stressing the symbolic value attributed to those bonds.

Another line of explanation comes from the bureaucratic politics approach to foreign policy, which suggests that post-imperial priorities in European countries are driven by segments of the foreign policy-making elite (Brysk et al., 2002). These elites, who have traditionally managed relations with former colonies, seek to maintain these ties even as economic and security interests fade out. Their motivations could stem from a desire to preserve their offices' budgets, personnel, and influence, but also from their specialised knowledge and networks within these ex-colonies (Brysk et al., 2002).

On the side of former colonies, explanations focus on their expected benefits from these special bonds with Europe, such as economic aid and cooperation, enhanced security, and a strengthened position in multilateral discussions, especially when it comes to smaller countries. From a realist perspective, other studies highlight the importance of regional powers in acting as promoters of new forms of relationship between their regional peers and the European ex-metropolis, as a source of establishing leadership in the region and a positive image as cross-regional bridge-makers.

That is the case of Mexico, who, in reaction to the Spanish proposal of hosting an Ibero-American Summit to celebrate the five-hundredth anniversary of the *first encounter* between Spain and America in 1492, suggested the establishment of periodic summits as a new framework for relations and expressed Mexico's willingness to host the first summit, as it did, in 1991 (Leandro, 2011). Similarly, Brazil played a key role in the creation of the CPLP during the eighties and early nineties, hosting the first meeting of the heads of state and government of Portuguese-speaking countries in São Luís do Maranhão in 1989 when they decided to establish the International Institute of the Portuguese Language (IILP), a direct precedent for CPLP and a part of its institutional structure since 2005. These cases suggest that former colonies are not merely passive participants in post-imperial organisations but rather active agents in shaping their structure and purpose. This raises the question of whether these states leverage historical ties to advance their strategic interests, assert regional leadership, and position themselves as key interlocutors in broader transregional dynamics or if their agency remains constrained by the institutional frameworks inherited from the colonial past.

Other Areas of Inquiry

From the field of regionalism and global studies, there is room to ask which role these organisations play in shaping regional and international policies; for example, by providing a reinforced platform for multilateral concertation as a previous stage in the UN, or as sources of public goods for the populations they reunite. In parallel with learning from sociolinguistic scholars, regionalism studies should not take for granted the importance of the geopolitics of languages. Beyond different weights and

priorities given to language policy, a common goal for SEGIB, CPLP, and OIF is to expand the presence of Spanish, Portuguese, and French as international languages in all domains and counteract the predominance of English as a global *lingua franca* (Massart-Piérard, 2007a).

Relationships among these organisations and other regional or global players are also far from being explored. For instance, how do SEGIB and CPLP compete or collaborate once they have regional and linguistic overlaps? Recent moves point towards cooperation, with the reciprocal approval of Observer status. A precedent in this regard can be found in the Colloquium of the Three Linguistic Spaces (TEL), which reunited SEGIB (by then SECIB), CPLP, and OIF in 2001 to enhance cooperation and dialogue among Spanish, Portuguese, and French-speaking countries, with a focus on global economies and the Internet. A second meeting was held only in 2015, in Lisbon, addressing plurilingualism and cultural dialogue without further progress, which opens the question of why it has not fructified, a similar fate to the Latin Union (Unilat), founded in 1954 to gather all Romance language speaking countries, and suspended since 2012.

Additionally, there are plenty of uncharted themes of transregionalisation processes happening among the countries in these organisations, at the level of societies and individuals, driven by migration, cultural industries flows, and education exchanges, which run in parallel with the institutionalisation process at the intergovernmental level. While traditional notions of territory and identity in post-imperial organisations have not been completely halted by globalisation and its transnational and transregional flows, there is an ongoing dialectic between de- and reterritorialisation affecting all aspects of social interaction, from politics to culture, within and among these regions (Middell, 2019).

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, we have examined how post-imperial organisations reflect historical continuities in regional cooperation, challenging mainstream regionalism theories that often overlook these cases. These organisations are not simply remnants of colonial relationships but political and cultural engagement instruments that extend beyond conventional economic and security-driven regionalism. Their institutional frameworks, decision-making structures, and the location of their headquarters in former metropolises suggest the persistence of historical power asymmetries, even as they present themselves as multilateral and inclusive.

A key feature of their legitimacy-building process is cultural diplomacy, which reframes colonial ties into shared history and common identity narratives. However, these narratives avoid historical reflection and reparative justice. Instead, they emphasise continuity as an asset, portraying historical bonds as inherently positive while sidestepping discussions of colonial violence, linguistic imposition, or economic dependence. This selective memory raises fundamental questions: To what extent do these organisations genuinely foster cooperation and regional identity, and to

what extent do they serve as soft power tools for former metropolises? How do these discourses influence contemporary political and economic ties between former colonial powers and ex-colonies?

At the same time, former colonies are not passive participants in these arrangements. While post-imperial organisations provide strategic advantages to former metropolises, they also offer ex-colonies access to economic aid, diplomatic influence, and cultural visibility on a global scale. Some former colonies have taken leading roles in shaping these organisations, using them as platforms to assert regional leadership and negotiate their position in global governance. This raises further questions: Does participation in these organisations enable former colonies to redefine post-colonial relations, or does it reinforce their structural dependence on former metropolises?

Beyond their internal dynamics, these organisations operate within larger geopolitical processes, intersecting with contemporary regionalism, multilateralism, and global governance debates. As globalisation alters regionalisation patterns, they navigate new challenges and opportunities—from linguistic policies aimed at counteracting English dominance to their positioning within broader international frameworks. How do these organisations interact with other regional bodies, and to what extent do they contribute to new models of regional cooperation? Do they represent a distinct category of post-imperial regionalism, or do they fit within existing theoretical frameworks of regionalism and international relations?

These are important questions that have rarely been raised—and even more rarely answered—within regionalism studies. The future of regionalism studies should not exclude or downplay any process of regionalisation due to a simplistic dichotomy separating relevant or irrelevant players or themes in the global arena, especially if the argument for the irrelevance is given by its main cultural, linguistic, or other *soft* dimension. Every regionalisation process and project has both material and symbolic dimensions, involving the creation of new spaces, mechanisms, and resources for social interaction and assigning a role to the region for its own members and in “the global imagination” (Castruck et al., 2019, p. 610). When it comes to the material side, we have covered quite a lot—especially in commercial, economic and security regionalism studies—but the same cannot be said about the symbolic and cultural aspects of regionalisation.

By engaging with the discourses, institutional structures, and geopolitical strategies of post-imperial organisations, this study thus contributes to a broader and more accurate understanding of contemporary regionalism. Besides, this tension between the conceptual cage of Eurocentric regionalism theories and the convenient blind spot that overlooks post-imperial organisations reveals a deeper paradox: while these frameworks claim to be universal, they evade critical reflection on their own post-imperial continuities. When challenging this omission, we open space to analyse both the historical legacies of imperialism and the contemporary power dynamics that continue to shape regional and global dynamics.

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Essay 17: Western and Eurocentric Origins of Regionalism: Rethinking Identity Beyond Binaries



Beatrix Futak-Campbell

Introduction

My contribution focuses on the Western and Eurocentric origins of regionalism thinking. Through identity, I demonstrate how flawed and limiting the basis of this thinking is. I argue that connecting identity and relationality would mean adapting a methodology with a different ontological premise to conventional and even more radical IR and regionalism approaches. It would also mean allowing a diverse set of epistemologies to enter our identity exploration. Doing so would also serve Globalising IR to embrace its ambition to bring together various non-Western, postcolonial, decolonial, and more radical queer theories, as well as conventional International Relations (IR) approaches, and to bridge these approaches on topics relevant globally and beyond.

Conventional IR approaches privilege various units of analysis, such as actors like states, international organisations, social movements, etc., or phenomena such as conflict, democracy, migration, etc. While critical and radical approaches of IR have pushed the discipline to accept different epistemological and even ontological positions, they have also been critiqued for privileging Western ontological assumptions, as pointed out by David Blaney and Arlene Tickner (2017), amongst many others. With Global IR, Amitav Acharya (2014) attempted to offer acknowledgement and an intellectual space to these positions. However, as Felix Anderl and Antonia Witt (2020) pointed out, not problematising the global in Global IR could lead to the reification of (Western) universality and perpetuating Western ontological assumptions in the way we view and also the way we study international relations. In a similar vein, Michael Barnett and Ayşe Zarakol (2023) argue that not challenging the commitments that we have already made around concepts such as white, black,

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men, and women can also lead to essentialising them. They called this the *essentialism trap*. They argue that the scholarship developed under the auspices of Global IR can easily fall into this trap.

Despite all attempts, it is very seductive to go along with what we know. It is equally demanding to profoundly question the essence of our knowing, what we know, the biases that we bring to our knowing, where our knowledge comes from and what or whose purpose it serves. Having said that, Globalising IR's main aim has always been to act as an umbrella for different sections of our discipline and create a space between different intellectual strands, including non-Western, post-Western, postcolonial, and other radical approaches (Acharya, 2014; Futak-Campbell, 2021, 2025).

My deliberate use of the term Globalising (rather than Global) IR has always been to show my preference for seeing this approach as active, not passive. The active form acknowledges the engagement with approaches previously silenced in IR and accepts that thinking about the *global* is a continually ongoing process that can never be finished and will never be done. This is not dissimilar to the starting point of Relational IR. Relationality is about the interconnectedness of these actors and phenomena ontologically (Shih, 2016). For Giorgio Shani (2017, p. 5), "interconnectedness" denotes our relationship with the cosmos and our place within it. It also means embracing indigenous traditions that have been overtly disregarded throughout history, especially since the Enlightenment, when the West broke epistemological tradition with religion. Except, as Walter Mignolo (2009) observes, for the *epistemic privilege* of Christianity. Replacing God with reason, according to Mignolo, still allowed the advancement of certain epistemic principles and preserved political interests to create a world order that privileges Western European states. This epistemic privilege further essentialises the Western- and Eurocentric worldview and the duality in our understanding of ontology. A relational understanding of ontology focuses on the interconnectedness of our essences, beings, and selves. Moreover, Trowsell et al., (2019, p. 3) allude to a relational way of knowing and being: "The object cannot exist without the observer; it does not exist separately from the act of observation, and the act of observation changes the relation of the observer, and the object observed." It goes beyond co-constitution. It goes beyond finding the right epistemology for the ontological position one takes or privileging methodological duality. It also goes beyond the binary understanding of reality. Identity is a very good way to explore how this could be done.

Essentialism and Identity: The Roots of Self Versus Others

Identity is who we are, how we present ourselves and how others perceive us. It connects us to each other. It connects us to the world around us and beyond. Identity, however, has been a contested concept. As individuals, we are in continual flux of figuring out who we are through changes in our bodies, our way of thinking, our circumstances, and also changes in others, communities, regions, counties, the world,

and beyond. Our identities, however, are often prescribed to us through the states and/or families we were born into. The passport we hold determines where we are welcomed, where we are tolerated or where we are outcasts. Our identities are also wrapped in difference through concepts of the *self* vis-à-vis the *other*. This binary between the self and the other is trapped in essentialist thinking. If our starting point is that in order to understand the *self*, there has to be an *other*, we fall right into the essentialism trap. Without the *other*, we simply cannot have a *complete self*. The *self*, then, on its own, is not knowable. It does not exist. It cannot possibly exist. It can only exist through the *other*, even if it is a constitutive other (Wendt, 1998).

The critical turn in IR brought light to this binary. It brought attention to the constructions of identity to reveal hierarchy, division, and, ultimately, power (inter alia Doty, 1996). Relational identity, however, goes beyond this binary and beyond what the constructivists call co-constitution (Trowsell et al., 2019). It gives space to millennia-old practices where these binaries simply do not exist, or at least not in the way we currently think about them. Relationality, through interconnectedness, allows us to accept different ontological practices as on par with each other. There is no hierarchy in being or in knowledge, nor a feeling of lessness. There is even an acceptance of moving between different logics.

Some see relationality as a move away from independence, which is something to strive for or to be idealised. In feminist philosophy, relationality challenges what Adriana Cavarero (2016) refers to as *homo erectus*, or the notion of an upright man. For her, this upright man encompasses the idealised selfhood that is independently formed, never in care or in connection with others, unlike women whose selfhood is relational by default due to our caring responsibilities as mothers and caregivers. This understanding of selfhood is more aligned with the critics of the Enlightenment. Meanwhile, for others, relationality can be traced back to Thomas Hobbes (1651). His account of our dependence on others to not harm us is constituted in relationships in both negative and positive senses. There are also relationality theorists who encourage us to connect human and non-human matter (Bennett, 2010). This kind of ecophilosophy is derived from the indigenous positionality of the self and the sacred connection between land, animals, humans, and the cosmos.

What unites all these strains of relationality is the belief that there is no *I* without the *you* or *us*. Relationality goes beyond the dichotomy between the *self* and the *other*. Cultivating this way of thinking takes time and requires a complete shift in our logic that has been steeped in historical, cultural and philosophical traditions. Our Western understanding of identities has been immersed in this binary logic too. We have cultivated these identities through history, literature and culture.

Greek historian Herodotus is a good example here to challenge the way we are thinking about the roots of identity and the binary of *self* vs *other*. Even though we know that Mesopotamian historiography existed for a millennium before Herodotus was even born, it is still he who is often considered the first historian (Finkelstein, 1963). He begins *Histories* by explicitly stating his aim to record the achievements of Hellenes (Greeks) and barbarians (non-Greeks) or, as per the contemporary interpretation, of Europe (West) and Asia (non-West/the rest). Naoise Mac Sweeney (2023,

p. 15) claims that Herodotus' account reads like an early version of a Western civilisational narrative. At least, that is how it has been perceived by many, including historians, scholars of IR, as well as philosophers and political theorists. Having said that, Mac Sweeney, in her brilliant recount of the (his)story of *The West*, also points to two important details that are hardly ever discussed. First, assuming that the classical Hellenic world was an early version of the West would miss the fact that Greeks did not think of themselves as Europeans. In fact, they thought Europeans were barbarians. Being Hellenes was about sharing a history, having shared ancestors and living life in a Hellenic way. As Herodotus (8.144, quoted by Mac Sweeney, 2023, p. 25) claimed, it was about "shared speech, common shrines and sacrifices of the gods, and shared lifestyles" over and above the bloodline. Traditions, language, literature and religious rituals were all equally important.

Moreover, while Hellenic identity was dependent on descent and ethnicity, skin colour was not part of this identity. Racial whiteness is a more modern phenomenon that did not play a dominant role in ancient discourse (McCoskey, 2023). Ancient Hellenic societies were not coherent ethnic groups but rather a variety of different communities living in and around the ancient city-states at the time. What is more, there is an acknowledgement of influences on them by others, more ancient societies and cultures in Western Asia. Herodotus' account is proof of this. While Western cultures read Herodotus to understand the conflicts and wars of ancient Greece, he sets out *Histories* with the intention of writing the chronicles of *all people*, both Hellenic and barbarians. He reflects on the influence of older civilisations like the Phrygians of Anatolia, the Lydians who introduced Greek to trade, coinage and games, the Phoenicians who brought the alphabet, but is most indebted to the Egyptians who brought religious customs, the calendar and science of astrology, and the practice of divination (Mac Sweeney, 2023, pp. 32–33). Herodotus also recounts the generosity of Egyptian pharaohs, the bravery of Scythian queens, the creativity of Babylonian engineers, and the beauty of Egyptian men.

This leads me to the second point, which is the mixed ethnicity of Herodotus himself. Herodotus is a Hellenic name, and he was Greek. So was his mother. Mac Sweeney (2023, p. 21) points to scholarship, demonstrating that several Anatolian links in his family, including Herodotus' father and cousins, had Carian names, the language of ancient Anatolia. His writings also showed a vast familiarity with Anatolia beyond the Aegean coast to the Black Sea. This mixed background, according to John Moles (2002), must have made it difficult for Herodotus to live and work in Athens. Athenians enjoyed an inherent superiority within ancient Hellenic society. They embodied, if not idealised, what it meant to be a Hellenes at the time. Migrants were perceived as outsiders or even dangerous *others*. As we know from history, Herodotus moved to what is now Italy. The point of reflection here is that *othering* is not a new concept. Before returning to the concept of relational identity, it is important to reflect on the methodological basis of Western and Eurocentrism.

Identity and Essentialism: What is Western-Eurocentric Methodology?

It is clear that Western centrism has a long intellectual history of dualism, which in turn promotes essentialism. The Enlightenment only cemented this position and replaced God with reason, as I stated earlier, retaining the *epistemic privilege* of Christianity (Mignolo, 2009, p. 432). The philosophical principle of mind–body dualism, posited by René Descartes, serves as the cornerstone of modern science. Descartes, as well as thinkers around the Enlightenment, were engrossed with freedom, mastery and progress, and more specifically, with “human freedom from prejudice and from political and social oppression, with freedom from drudgery, pain, and anxiety” (Schouls, 1989, p. 3). Furthermore, the Cartesian methodological and epistemological position of “Cogito, ergo sum” (i.e., “I think, therefore I am”) offered autonomy to humans. The problem with this, as Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 252) puts it:

Beneath the “I think” we can read “others do not think,” and behind the “I am” it is possible to locate the philosophical justification for the idea that “others are not” or do not have being. In this way, we are led to uncover the complexity of the Cartesian formulation. From “I think, therefore I am”, we are led to the more complex and both philosophically and historically accurate expression: “I think (others do not think, or do not think properly), therefore I am (others are not, lack being, should not exist, or are dispensable).”

This has two important implications. First, studying, for example, identity is done in a way that simply does not consider the rest of the world or the way others shaped Western Eurocentric understanding of identity (Go, 2014); nor does it accept the contributions of the rest of the world made to knowledge production in and of identity. In short, the issue here is not only the *Western* or *European* formation of identity but also overlooking the ties with *non-Western* and *non-European* identities or the *constitutive outside* as formulated by David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah (2008). It does not allow us to explore the complex relationship between Western and indigenous societies. Unpacking this methodological Western-Eurocentrism is helped by re-reading the history of modern science.

James Poskett’s (2022) rich account focuses on central figures of the evolution of modern science. Posket mindfully traces the way non-Western, non-European, and indigenous cultures contributed to the creation of science. Through connecting the various inputs from diverse groups of people and through several examples over time, he shows how modern science, as we know it, was very much a collective effort. This collectivity was often acknowledged through citations but somehow never became part of the narrative of the Enlightenment. Not acknowledging the non-European and non-Western European voices that contributed to knowledge production essentially leads to concealing, if not disregarding, the achievements and participation of others. Therefore, engagement with the constitutive outside is only one element of a better understanding of the development of modern science, the Enlightenment and the impact of methodological dualism on our understanding of identity.

Second, recovering the silenced narratives through the histories of those people who were inside as well as outside of the West and Europe helps us to challenge the homogenisation of the human experience through the application of scientific methods. It challenges what counts as science, whose knowledge matters and what kind of knowledge matters. It accepts a relational ontology that does not privilege one methodology over another.

Conclusion—A Relational Identity

As we have seen, creating a binary between the *self*, us, and the *other*, them, is as ancient as time. Studying identity through dualism essentialises not only dualism as a methodological form, but also essentialises identity. Recognising that such binaries served the same ideological reasons in ancient times as today is key to shifting to a relational understanding of identity. Binaries create a hierarchy and demonstrate power. They help to initiate and also perpetuate Western superiority through the invention of Western civilisation. History is central to this. It is the same history that we still recount today. It is the same history that carries concepts that we claim to be unique cornerstones of the West. The ancient languages (Greek and Latin) are still taught today to Western European children in elite secondary schools. Not being familiar with this version of history is no option. It is ingrained in our consciousness whether we like it or not. It is also tied to an idealised version of purity of our civilisational heritage that leaves little room to allow influences of others, let alone explore other forms of ontological or epistemological position. Considering identity through relationality helps us to connect these different ways of seeing identity. It assists us in bridging the gap between the dual and non-dual worlds and moving between these worlds with ease, respect, and care. Only through applying relationality can we move away from binaries and respect each other's boundaries for what they are.

Migration is a perfect policy domain to explore the impact of applying a relational identity. People have been migrating from the beginning of time. Just like Herodotus, people have been searching for opportunities, safety, and security. Viewing migrants as *others*, who are not part of the *self*, who cannot ever really belong to the *self*, is debilitating for all. On one level, it allows far-right parties all over the world to flourish and blame all things wrong with our communities on the powerless but clearly responsible other, the migrants. Politicians and leaders, therefore, do not have to take responsibility for their failures or lack of imagination. On another level, we as a society do not have to grow and create. It reinforces our superiority vis-à-vis the migrant *other*. If dominance is central, then our only job is to maintain our intellectual primacy over others. It has worked for the West and (Western) Europeans for millennia.

Embracing a relational identity would allow us to focus, develop, and nourish the *self* without having to make it contingent on the *other*. It would be a move away from binaries and essentialising our identities. At the same time, it would allow us

to adopt a deeper plurality in our thinking of the origins of regionalism. It would embrace the globality of regions, regionalisms, and regionalisation processes.

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Part II
How Relevant Is Mainstream Theorising
(Still)?

Essay 18: The (Continuing) Promise of Mainstream Theorising



Lukas Grundsfield and Diana Panke

Introduction

Almost three decades ago, Keohane and Martin (1995) emphasised the *promise of institutionalist theory*. This essay seeks to do the same for mainstream theorising on regionalism. While Keohane and Martin replied to criticism from realist perspectives, mainstream theorising on regionalism is mainly criticised by researchers seeking to globalise International Relations (IR). Global regionalism strives to overcome Eurocentric biases in the study of regions by embracing diverse philosophical traditions, epistemologies, theories, concepts, and methodologies, emphasising local agency and seeking to acquire in-depth region-specific expertise (Bilgin & Futák-Campbell, 2021, p. 17; Newby, 2021). Its proponents thus argue that mainstream theories produce incomplete and oppressive knowledge fused with power structures emerging from their Eurocentric and colonial origins (Acharya, 2014; Bilgin & Futák-Campbell, 2021). These critiques are much more sophisticated and valid than Mearsheimer's (1994) claim that institutionalism represented a *false promise*. However, sticking to the comparison with the debate about realism, in this essay, we reject the notion that mainstream theorising on regionalism represents the "continuing story of a death foretold" (Guzzini, 2003). Instead, we argue that mainstream theory continues to hold a promise for studying regions and regional international organisations (RIOs). More specifically, it is precisely its systematic pursuit of generalisable knowledge that represents the advantage of mainstream theorising over global regionalism. However, instead of unambiguously embracing mainstream theorising or dismissing the critiques against it, our main argument is one of the relative merits: there are types of questions which mainstream theorising can better answer and types

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_18

of knowledge that it is better able to produce than global regionalism—and the reverse is equally true. As a result, we argue that instead of excluding the other perspective from the realm of legitimate research (Jackson, 2011), the study of regionalism requires greater epistemic empathy emerging from the awareness of the limitations of its own approach and the relative merits of the other.

Mainstream Theorising on Regionalism...

Since the end of WWII and again after the end of the Cold War, the number of regional international organisations (RIOs) in which states from a geographically defined region cooperate with each other in an institutionalised setting has increased considerably (Panke et al., 2020). Today, there are more than 70 RIOs in Africa, including the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or the Southern African Development Community (SADC), in the Americas, such as the Andean Community (ANDEAN), the Common Market of the South (Mercosur), or the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), in Asia, for instance, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Shanghai Cooperation Association (SCO), or Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), and in Europe, such as the European Union (EU), the Council of Europe (CoE), or the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

While there have always been single case studies, most often on the EU and its predecessors (e.g., Moravcsik, 1993; Pollack, 1997; Stone Sweet & Brunell, 1998), on ASEAN (e.g., Narine, 2002) or the AU and the Organisation of African Unity (e.g., Makinda & Okumu, 2007), comparative RIO research especially took off with the substantial increase in the numbers of these organisations (e.g., Balogun, 2021; Börzel & Risse, 2016; Sbragia, 2008). This strand of scholarship aims to detect similarities and differences between large numbers of RIOs and generalisations of insights concerning questions related to polity, politics or policy beyond an individual RIO. In order to arrive at such generalisations, corresponding comparative RIO research adopts an explanatory research design rather than a reconstructive or interpretative focus. Thus, it engages in abductive theory generation and refinement, which often combines deductive theory-based hypotheses-generation with rigorous empirical testing of the hypotheses, leading to inductively refined hypotheses and possibly also theory-refinements (Panke, 2018).

Examples of such mainstream theorising in RIO scholarship include studies on the authority of regional economic organisations (Haftel, 2013; Haftel & Hofmann, 2017) or of (global and regional) international organisations (Hooghe & Marks, 2015; Hooghe et al., 2019). In their work, Hooghe and Marks distinguish analytically between delegation (to third-party actors to save transaction costs, for instance, concerning agenda-setting through a body such as the European Commission instead of the states) and pooling (e.g., the collective exercise of authority by member states, for instance, through majority voting) as two dimensions of authority in IOs.

Pertaining to functionalism and rational institutional design approaches, they theorise that institutional design choices are influenced by two core features of IOs, namely the number of member states and the policy scope covered by an IO. Larger IOs have greater functional demand for pooling as well as delegation in order to avoid lengthy negotiations between member states and potential blockades, while general-purpose IOs are expected to have a greater need to delegate authority and pooling than task-specific IOs (Hooghe & Marks, 2015; Lenz et al., 2015). Quantitative empirical analyses lend support to all but one expectation, as general-purpose IOs are less inclined to pooling than expected, which calls for hypothesis refinement.

While Hooghe and Marks focus on a mixed sample of IOs, including RIOs, other scholarship focuses specifically on a set of more than 70 RIOs. For instance, Jetschke and colleagues examine institutional similarities and differences between RIOs existing since 1945, their change over time and the diffusion of institutional design models (Jetschke, 2022; Jetschke et al., 2021). Again, the approach used for this study is mainstream theorising on a general level, not considering individual regional and socio-cultural features of RIOs. Thus, they hypothesise that the “most likely source of similarities is common RIO membership” (Jetschke et al., 2021, p. 198) and stress that, next to diffusion approaches, hypotheses to explain RIO-(dis)similarities can be derived from International Political Economy, hegemonic stability theory, as well as institutional design approaches. Once such a broad set of hypotheses from different mainstream theories has been developed and empirically tested, theoretical refinements or modelling will be the next step. Hence, this strand of work carries the potential to shed novel light on the question of whether the EU has been the model for diffusion, which has been debated in the field for quite some time (e.g., Börzel & Risse, 2012; Grabbe, 2001; Lenz, 2021).

Comparative RIO scholarship focuses not only on institutional design and related features, such as RIO legitimacy (Lenz & Viola, 2017; Rittberger & Schroeder, 2016; Schmidtke & Lenz, 2024), but also on the relationship between RIOs and their member states. Concerning the latter, Panke, Grundsfield and Tverskoi comparatively study more than 50 withdrawals and more than 120 exit threats from more than 70 RIOs between 1945 and 2022. Drawing on rational choice and neo-institutionalist approaches, hypotheses accounting for variation between states and RIOs are deduced and put into a quantitative and qualitative plausibility probe (Panke et al., 2025b). Similarly, other contributions focus on differences between RIOs in responding to rule-violating member states, such as in the context of military coups (e.g., Grundsfield, 2024; Hohlstein, 2022). These studies allow us to arrive at empirically enriched conclusions concerning the relationship between RIOs and their member states. Pointing toward ideological (dis)similarities between member states, states’ relative power within a region, regional hegemons, the availability of alternative cooperation outlets, and the embeddedness of norms within organisations, they identify generalisable factors influencing member states’ dissatisfaction with RIOs and corresponding exit threats and exits as well as organisations’ proclivity to sanction their members (Panke et al., 2025a). Due to the projects’ systematic analyses and the deployment of mainstream theories, the findings also allow us to draw conclusions for IOs writ large.

Yet another strand of comparative RIO research engaging in mainstream theorising is studies on regional regime complexes. Due to the rise in the number of RIOs, their increase in size, and the broadening of policy scopes (Panke et al., 2020), RIOs overlap with each other concerning member states and policy competencies at the same time (Panke & Stapel, 2018a). This regional regime complexity can have negative implications due to duplications of tasks, waste of resources, and the production of incompatible RIO policies and approaches (e.g., Alter & Meunier, 2009; Alter & Raustiala, 2018; Brosig, 2011; Clark, 2021; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2022; Panke & Stapel, 2018b), but also carries the promise of sustained cooperation due to contingencies, greater geographic reach, synergies and potential reinforcing approaches (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Westerwinter, 2022; Faude & Große-Kreul, 2020; Gehring & Faude, 2014; Panke & Friedrichs, 2023; Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2023). Thus, comparative RIO scholarship utilises mainstream IR theories that have been developed to explain state cooperation under anarchy to develop hypotheses on conditions and outcomes of cooperation, competition, or co-existence between overlapping RIOs (e.g., Panke & Stapel, 2024; Panke & Stapel, under review; Henning & Pratt, 2023). Again, mainstream theories are adapted to be used for the comparative study of RIOs on a rather high level of abstraction, which—while disregarding specificities of individual RIOs—allow for generalisable insights across a high number of organisations.

... Its Limits ...

In other words, mainstream theorising in comparative RIO research tends to privilege external validity over context sensitivity and does so with respect to a broad array of different research questions. However, mainstream theorising on regionalism—just as mainstream research in IR more generally—has been repeatedly criticised for its Eurocentric bias. Mainstream regionalism moved beyond earlier accounts that regarded the EU as the ‘gold standard’ of regional integration against which all other RIOs are compared and evaluated (Panke, 2017). However, it remains largely informed by and focused on theories and concepts developed in the European context (Bilgin & Futák-Campbell, 2021). Two strands of criticism have been raised against this. *First*, mainstream regionalism has been criticised for producing incomplete and sometimes outright wrong knowledge. For example, Börzel and Risse (2019) show that theories drawing on economic interconnectedness to explain the number and extent of institutionalisation of RIOs within a region do not travel beyond the European context in which they were initially developed. Ignoring regionally specific explanatory factors, mainstream theorising may thus fail in its own endeavour of producing generalisable explanations. This criticism may be accommodated relatively easily—after all, Börzel and Risse, in a very mainstream way, identified security interdependencies, requirements for regime stability, and collective regional identity narratives as additional and conditional explanatory factors, thus refining the

theoretical account. However, this is much less possible concerning the *second* criticism that mainstream theorising (re)produces oppressive and exclusive knowledge. Following Cox's dictum that "[t]heory is always for someone and for some purpose" (1981, p. 128), proponents of global regionalism, drawing on critical and postcolonial accounts, argue that mainstream regionalism reproduces the Eurocentric and colonial concepts from which it emerged, and the oppressive power structures embedded therein (Bilgin & Futák-Campbell, 2021). Mainstream regionalism is thus, in a way, "complicit in the marginalisation of the postcolonial world" in the understanding of regions and RIOs (Acharya, 2014).

... and Its Continued Promise

Acknowledging these critiques, what might be the continued promise of mainstream theorising on regionalism? Or, put differently, even though mainstream theorising might produce incomplete and excluding knowledge, what might nonetheless be its relative merit? *First* and most generally, we argue that there is an inherent value in making comparisons and attempting to produce generalisable knowledge. This aligns with the saying that a person who knows only one country knows no countries; at a fundamental level, all knowledge is relative. Following the criticism outlined above, it is indeed not useful to analyse, for example, the institutional design of a RIO *only* in comparison to the EU, especially not if, in the comparison, the EU is deployed as a normatively ideal endpoint (Bilgin & Futák-Campbell, 2021, p. 10). However, if we compare an RIO's institutional design to that of no other organisation, what would we then learn about it? It would be impossible to say whether the organisation is characterised by high or low authority, whether it is open or closed toward non-state actors, or whether its institutional design was influenced by other RIOs. While making these kinds of evaluations is not always necessary, they nonetheless often produce valuable knowledge, and even research based on single-case studies often deploys implicit comparisons. Accepting the epistemological merits of comparative analyses points toward mainstream methodologies that seek to systematise it.

Second, comparative analysis of RIOs across different regions is useful because RIOs, in some ways, *are* the same across regions, as indicated by the null results when inserting regional dummies into statistical analyses of RIOs (see, e.g., Panke & Stapel, 2023b). While this is also a function of the questions asked, similarities between RIOs are undeniable—be it in terms of institutional design or relations between the organisations and their member states. For example, Panke (2020) finds that across regions, states have, over time, joined more RIOs and delegated more policy competencies to them, which has been pursued more by powerful states and states with strong trade interests and less by authoritarian states. The flip side is that RIOs also differ in many dimensions *besides* regional location. Just as race or gender provide valuable focal points for analysing differences and inequalities between people, if used as *sole* analytical lenses, they also gloss over and even obfuscate differences

running counter to them. Thus, while regional location represents one source of differences between RIOs, differences concerning issues such as institutional authority, decision-making mechanisms, policy competencies, or institutional legitimacy cut across regions. Analysing similarities and differences of RIOs thus requires focusing on factors beyond their regional location and thus toward mainstream theorising.

Third, neither regions nor RIOs exist in isolation. While regions are not closed containers but permeated by manifold socio-economic processes of globalisation, RIOs exist within a dense framework of other (regional) IOs—and thus in contexts of regime complexity. Today, most states are members of several RIOs, and all RIOs overlap with other RIOs in terms of member states and policy competencies (Haftel & Lenz, 2022; Panke & Stapel, 2023a). As a result, RIOs cannot be fully understood in isolation from this institutional context, which they both influence and are influenced by. Understanding RIOs' management of (regional) regime complexity and the positive or negative effects emerging therefrom points toward the limitations of non-mainstream or global approaches. Recent research drew on concrete *interface conflicts* as focal points to analyse the relationships between (regional) IOs (Kreuder-Sonnen & Zürn, 2020; Panke & Stapel, under review). However, as in-depth knowledge always comes at the expense of width, non-mainstream analyses of relations between different RIOs may run into practical limitations. Here, the relative merit of the self-consciously heuristic approach of mainstream theorising—reducing complexity at the expense of depth—may prove beneficial. Further, as relations between RIOs and their effects differ according to other factors besides the organisations' region, understanding their underlying dynamics again points toward the relevance of mainstream analysis.

Conclusions

While we argue that mainstream theorising still holds promises for studying regions and RIOs, we neither embrace it without qualifications nor are we dismissive of the critiques raised against it. Instead, moving forward, mainstream theorising will benefit immensely from bringing insights from global regionalism on board. On the one hand, this should include moving beyond a perspective on regions as mere 'data' toward an appreciation of the complexity, richness, and indeed idiosyncrasies of each region and the work of area studies and global perspectives grappling with it (Newby, 2021). On the other hand, mainstream theorising would benefit from an increased reflection on and self-conscious awareness of the kinds of knowledge it produces, as well as the epistemological blind spots and power structures embedded therein. In conclusion, we thus want to make the case for enhanced and more open dialogue between mainstream—and global regionalism—for which we regard the present volume as a valuable example. Instead of redrawing the boundaries of legitimate research, dismissing alternative accounts as either unscientific or instruments of colonial oppression (Jackson, 2011), researchers working in either tradition should develop a greater awareness of the type of knowledge produced by their own

approach, its inherent limitations, and the relative merit of the other approach which may be able to answer questions that one cannot even ask. Accepting the fact that both mainstream and global researchers resemble blind people trying to figure out the shape of this elephant called ‘regionalism’ (Puchala, 1971), greater epistemic empathy in the study of regionalism is urgently required.

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Essay 19: The Contentious Concept of the *Region* in the Theory of Economic Integration



Miguel Ángel Sevilla-Duro

Introduction

The term *regional scope* in the context of economic cooperation or integration organisations does not refer to a strictly geographical understanding of the concept of *region*. Instead, it encompasses a much more diffuse and tenuous concept that has been the subject of extensive debate among scholars specialising in comparative regionalism over several decades. Given the current state of research and the blurring effects of globalisation on this point, it seems appropriate to reconsider, at least as a hypothesis, whether *the regional*, as a criterion, is still useful and necessary in its current understanding to define the phenomena of cooperation and integration. It appears to be becoming increasingly superfluous, unless its interpretation is substantially modified on a case-by-case basis.

It is widely acknowledged that economic cooperation or integration agreements can be either bilateral or plurilateral in nature. However, it is important to note that plurilateralism should not be exclusively associated with the regional level. Although the majority of the plurilateral agreements are regional in scope, this is not a universal rule. To illustrate this, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) includes a diverse array of countries, such as Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, and Vietnam, among others.

So, what should the meaning of the term *region* be? This is a complex concept, the meaning of which is not straightforward to ascertain. It is evident that the term is flexible and adaptable, extending beyond the boundaries of the nation-state in both international and territorial terms (Hooghe et al., 2010, p. 4). In the context of legal theory, the term is predominantly employed to signify the internal decentralisation of states. In this sense, Karl Deutsch's poetic reflection is particularly noteworthy: "For the political scientist, the definition of a region is considerably more difficult

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than the definition of a rose was for Gertrude Stein. We cannot simply say: ‘a region is a region’” (Deutsch, 1969, p. 93). Furthermore, from an academic standpoint, it is untenable to accept that the definition of the term *region* is subjective, intuitive, or specific to each economic cooperation or integration organisation. Such an approach would result in a concept akin to Laclau’s *empty signifiers*.

The objective of this essay is to analyse the use of the adjective *regional* that often accompanies the term *integration*, critically examining the idea of *region* in both classical cooperation or integration agreements and in so-called mega-regionalism. The central argument of this essay is that the evolution of recent decades has witnessed an expansion in the composition and membership of these integrations, which increasingly encompasses states from multiple regions. Consequently, it is contended that the term *regional integration*, while still useful due to its widespread familiarity, lacks the precision required for use in the social sciences. In this context, the essay contrasts the conventional usage of the term *region* in prevailing regional integration theories with a critical examination of its geographical rigidity. While mainstream theories employ abstract frameworks, such as the adjective *regional*, to address broader contexts, they often struggle to capture the growing complexity of economic integration in an interconnected world. This limitation arises from the historical foundations of regionalism theories in contexts where these agreements were geographically cohesive, rendering them less effective in addressing contemporary interregional or global dynamics, which demand more flexible and inclusive conceptual frameworks.

The *Region* as a Concept

The notion *region* is derived from the Latin *regiō*, *regiōnis*, which can be translated as *direction*, *boundary*, or *dividing line*. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term in its primary sense as follows: “A land; a country; any large portion of the earth’s surface considered as defined or distinguished from adjacent areas in some way, as by culture, government, topography, climate, fauna or flora, etc.” and it defines it in the second sense as an administrative division. An almost identical definition is given in Spanish by the Dictionary of the Real Academia Española de la Lengua in its first sense: “portion of territory determined by ethnic characteristics or special circumstances of climate, production, topography, administration, government, etc.” The two definitions appear to be equally applicable to both internal and external contexts. Consequently, it is often assumed that the characteristics of state regions (decentralisation) can be extended in a similar manner to the international order.

In the field of international law, the most frequently cited definition of a region is that proposed by Nye, who conceptualises it as “a limited number of states linked by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence” (Nye, 1971, p. vii; cited by Van Langenhove, 2013, p. 475). In the field of Spanish-American academic discourse, Sánchez Agesta’s (1986, p. 453) seminal text posits that the defining characteristics of *international regions* are geographical contiguity; a political and ideological community, which is a necessary complement to the continental

solidarity that must exist; a cultural community in a broad sense (encompassing race, history, language, religion); and a community of economic interests, which has specific ways of manifesting itself. Most notably, an exhaustive analysis of the literature on organisations of cooperation and integration reveals Luk Van Langenhove to be the foremost author who has explored this issue to its fullest extent. He proposed a comprehensive theory of regions, meticulously delineating the characteristics of the concept¹ while ultimately postulating “a geographical area that is not a state but has some statehood properties and can therefore act as if it is a state” (2013, p. 482).

Fawcett (2005, p. 24) understands that the idea of region needs to be “redefined,” “to incorporate commonality, interaction and hence the possibility of cooperation.” In another vein, quoting Holsti, she also argues that regions “could be seen as units or ‘zones’, based on groups, states or territories, whose members display some identifiable patterns of behaviour.” Regions are, in any case, “smaller than the international system of states, but larger than any individual state,” and “they may be permanent or temporary, institutionalised or not.” She adds, however, that understanding regionalism requires a certain degree of flexibility in its delimitation, for which she suggests “a multilevel and multipurpose definition, one that moves beyond geography and beyond states” (Fawcett, 2004, p. 431).

This terminological imprecision is compounded by the fact that, as Acharya (2009) points out, and as many authors agree (including Fioramonti, 2014, p. 7), regions are not pre-determined: they change over time in line with the political, economic and social discourse prevailing in each society. This means that what is considered a regional arrangement today may be interregional in the future. It follows that, ultimately, “regions and regionalism are what states and non-state actors make of them,” which requires “a certain amount of both definitional and theoretical flexibility” since “there is no ‘ideal’ region, nor any single agenda to which all regions aspire,” given the diversity of their compositions, capacities and aspirations are diverse (Fawcett, 2004, p. 434).

The term *region* and its adjective, *regional*, are always, at least in part, defined geographically. This is a widely accepted position among academics and is regarded as an integral aspect of the term’s usage. Consequently, the classification of a geographical area as a *region* serves to indicate that, although it may exhibit characteristics analogous to a state, it is not a state in itself. Rather, it occupies a position above or below the state yet retains certain attributes that are reminiscent of the state (De Lombaerde et al., 2010, p. 736). However, this gives rise to significant conceptual issues when the adjective *regional* is ascribed to international organisations engaged in cooperation or integration, which are presumed to be inextricably linked.

¹ Van Langenhove (2013, pp. 482–487) provides a clarification regarding the dual tendency of this phenomenon: to support the states that make it up and to acquire autonomy from them. Additionally, the author identifies three characteristics: capacity for action, statehood, and its own identity. Furthermore, he delineates a triple form of manifestation of its periphery, which includes a single economic space, a single public goods space, or a single sovereignty. Finally, he presents a dual form of emergence and development, which can occur either through region builders or through regionalisation processes.

Megaregionalism

These conceptual issues are due to the fact that, as is typically the case, the term *region* is synonymous with one of the outcomes of the United Nations geo-scheme.² It is noteworthy that there are instances of economic integration, such as the aforementioned CPTPP, in which the signatory states originate from not one but four distinct regions. These are Southeast Asia, Oceania (specifically, the region formed by Australia and New Zealand), North America, Central America and South America. Then, the CPTPP, as an economic cooperation or integration organisation, would, therefore, extend beyond the regional level. Adopting a more expansive definition, for instance, by equating the concept of a region with that of a continent, would extend the scope of this agreement to encompass signatories from three distinct continents (America, Asia, and Oceania). Consequently, this integration would extend beyond the regional level. It is not feasible to categorise the CPTPP as a regional entity unless an ad hoc definition of the term *region* is adopted. Moreover, the issue of states that span multiple regions or continents, such as Russia, Turkey, and the Jordan Valley states, introduces another layer of complexity. The same can be said for states with territories that are not fully unified geographically. Spain, for example, has a presence in Europe and on the African continent through Ceuta and Melilla and the Canary Islands. This also applies to all states with colonies, such as the United Kingdom and its overseas territories, or France's overseas departments and regions.

One might be forgiven for assuming that the CPTPP represents an exception to the general rule and could, therefore, be considered a *white swan* in terms of the philosophy of science. Nevertheless, this assumption is erroneous and demonstrably inaccurate. A comparable phenomenon can be observed in numerous other integrations. It is estimated that 29.6% of cooperation and integration agreements transcend regional borders (Pareja et al., 2018, p. 116). If the concept of *region* is defined in accordance with the United Nations classification, it can be observed that even the European Union (EU) comprises member states that extend their territory across four regions. A similar argument could be made with regard to the South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement (SPARTECA), the Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), or indeed the African Union, among many other international organisations. Furthermore, even if the concept of *region* is considered synonymous with that of a continent, several exceptions can be identified. For instance, the Greater Arab Free Trade Agreement (GAFTA or PAFTA) associates states from Asia and Africa.

² The information is available online at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49/>. Another categorisation is that of the World Bank, which divides the world into six regions: Africa, East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia. This classification can be refined to some extent according to factors such as the number of regions on each continent or the degree of ambiguity surrounding the geographical affiliation of states to a region (see Miller & Standaert, 2023, pp. 14–15).

This is particularly the case with regard to agreements between two or more international organisations engaged in cooperation or integration (or between one of them and one or more states). It is evident that agreements such as CETA (between Canada and the European Union), the Free Trade Area between the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), or the Free Trade Area between the GCC and MERCOSUR extend well beyond the scope of regional agreements.

It is precisely in the context of these agreements that a new terminological discrepancy emerges, which is directly related to the aforementioned issue. Such agreements are variously referred to as *mega-regional trade agreements* or *multilateral regionalism agreements*, and they are also sometimes designated as *cross-regional agreements*.³ This vague definition, which is even more challenging to enclose, is typically attributed to economic cooperation or integration agreements that involve partners at different levels of development and in different regions. These agreements encompass larger volumes of global trade and foreign direct investment and seek to reach a deeper consensus on a wide range of issues (World Economic Forum, 2014, p. 11). Notable examples of such agreements include the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), between the EU and the United States, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), and the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, which have all faced significant challenges. As a result of their distinctive attributes, they may be considered as a middle phase between bilateralism and multilateralism (Zamora & Espitia, 2019, p. 520). The regional component of this term is problematic in several ways, particularly due to the logic of *a minore ad maius*. While the concept of regionalism in economic integration agreements is not entirely clear, establishing a clear notion of mega-regionalism is even more challenging. However, it is common for the signatory states (or integrations) in these agreements to be from different regions, although this may not be essential depending on the delimitation of the concept.⁴

Then, the ambiguity of the regional signifier is not exclusive to the megaregional context. Furthermore, it is often conflated with, or subsumed under, the interregional, multiregional, or transregional in numerous other contexts⁵; and there are numerous integrations that cannot be classified as regional in any way (see Duro, 2024, pp. 99–100).

³ This term is used synonymously throughout one of the most recent and comprehensive works on the subject edited by Velut et al. (2021).

⁴ For example, numerous authors and institutions (including the aforementioned World Economic Forum) consider the China-Japan-South Korea trade agreement, which was proposed in 2002 and is still under negotiation, to be a mega-regional agreement, despite the fact that the three states are Asian.

⁵ It is of the utmost importance to differentiate between the meanings attributed to these adjectives in the international sphere and the meanings they have at the (sub)national level, where their use is more frequent. While there is no universally accepted usage of these adjectives in the legal domain, in the realms of politics and international relations, cross-regionalism has become nearly ubiquitous as a synonym for the aforementioned adjectives. At the subnational level, this term is typically employed in reference to the territorial entities or units that constitute contiguous subnational entities or units spanning two or more states (see Perkmann & Sum, 2002, p. 3).

Conclusion

In sum, in view of the above considerations, it can be inferred that the theoretical alternatives with respect to the utilisation of the regional criterion can be distilled into two fundamental positions. The first position advocates the incorporation of the regional criterion, albeit with a highly flexible and typically ad hoc or case-by-case interpretation that deviates from the conventional geographical divisions, which are perceived to be dysfunctional and unnatural from a scientific standpoint.⁶ In contrast, the second position proposes excluding the regional criterion from any toolbox employed to define economic cooperation or integration organisations. The concept of *region* has proved to be an invaluable tool for contextualising comparative studies. However, as the regional boundaries of these arrangements become increasingly blurred, it seems essential to rethink the use of this category and to adapt it to reflect the evolving nature of these organisations.

The first of these two positions is considered more suitable. This does not entail advocating for a universal definition of *region*; rather, it puts forward a more nuanced approach to address its conceptual rigidity in the context of contemporary dynamics. This approach prioritises flexible interpretative tools that accommodate the diversity of (mega)regional configurations without imposing a strict or homogeneous understanding, nor erasing contextual particularities, but acknowledging the limitations of prevailing frameworks and their applicability in interregional or global contexts. This is especially pertinent in view of the increasing number of economic cooperation and integration arrangements (mainly free trade agreements) between countries on different continents. The value of such an ad hoc re-understanding of the *region* lies in its ability to enhance analytical clarity and adaptability in comparative regional studies, especially when addressing phenomena like mega-regionalism. Adopting this flexible approach to the concept of *region* enables scholars and practitioners to enhance their understanding of the fluidity of regional boundaries and their impact on economic integration, thereby bridging theoretical gaps and offering a more inclusive perspective.

⁶ It can be argued that this alternative may be optimal in certain instances but not in all. To illustrate, taking the interpretation to its ultimate extremes, the CPTPP could be understood as a regional entity if it is considered to encompass states that share a geographical feature in the form of access to the Pacific Ocean. This is analogous to the so-called “Mediterranean states”. Although this would constitute a fictitious or ad hoc elaboration of a concept of a region that is far removed from the UN divisions, it could be considered a valid approach. In this vein, some authors (De Lombaerde et al., 2010, p. 740) posit the possibility of disregarding the economic feature under certain conditions, such that the defining characteristic of a region may be the existence of a shared identity or social recognition (Kurdistan could serve as an illustrative example), or minimum levels of regional interdependence, such as those observed in security communities. Nevertheless, in some instances, this is not a viable proposition. The GCC agreement with MERCOSUR serves as an illustrative example, as there is no geographical, identity or other basis for the regional notion. This is also the case for several other agreements. Furthermore, the MERCOSUR-Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the US-West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), and any other regional agreement between the EU and a state or group of states in Asia, Africa, or America would also fall under this category.

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Essay 20: Differentiated Disintegration: An Analytical Framework



Andrés Malamud and Nicole Jenne

Introduction

Regional organisations come in different sizes and shapes. Size is a product of integration—or disintegration; shape is a product of differentiation. In this essay, we develop two arguments: first, that integration and disintegration are not symmetric processes, as they are impelled by different drivers; second, that integration and disintegration are not necessarily synchronic, as one can progress in the dimension of size while simultaneously regress (or remain still) in the dimension of shape, or vice versa. Building on these two insights, we sketch a sequential framework that applies to both integration and disintegration, two phenomena that have either been studied separately or as mirror images of each other (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Vollaard, 2018; Webber, 2019). The framework proposed here captures different paths and causes of disintegration, which have received significantly less attention than integration.

The size of a political unit results from a tradeoff between the benefits of scale, mainly regarding the capacity of production (markets) and destruction (armies), and the costs of the heterogeneity of preferences of the population (Alesina & Spolaore, 2003). This formula can be thought of in physical terms. The square-cube law is a mathematical principle applied in various scientific fields that describes the relationship between volume and surface area as the size of a tridimensional body increases or decreases. First described in 1638 by Galileo Galilei, the principle states that as a body grows in size, its volume grows faster than its surface area in a proportion of three to two. This has important implications in fields ranging from biology to engineering. It helps explain phenomena, including why large mammals like elephants have thicker

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_20

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skins than smaller mammals (i.e. to support a disproportionately more massive body) and why building taller skyscrapers is increasingly difficult. We suggest that the square-cube law can help us think about size tradeoffs in regional organisations, as institutions that are able to accommodate heterogeneous preferences at a certain scale are increasingly ineffective at larger scales. Size nurtures power but also feeds weaknesses; when the latter crosses a given threshold, which is not natural but contextual, disintegration may proceed.

The shape of a political unit results from the interaction between three dimensions: level of authority, scope of authority (or policy breadth) and territorial extension. If all three evolve in the same direction, we may speak of homogeneous integration or disintegration; if not, we will witness varying degrees and types of differentiated (dis)integration.

We proceed in two steps to grasp the different paths of how policymaking authority moves from states to regional organisations. First, we discuss the concept of disintegration and its different types based on the existing literature and an empirical survey of regional integration initiatives since the 1960s. Then, we develop a sequential scheme of regional integration/disintegration that brings together process-centred, neofunctionalist theorising and subsequent works on the drivers of regional integration.

Concept, Types, and Cases of Disintegration

Disintegration comes in different types. In 1967, the European Merger Treaty (also known as the Treaty of Brussels) combined the independent institutions of three European Communities into a single Commission. It terminated the office of the High Authority, whose strong supranational powers had raised concerns within the French government. In 1999, Mauritania, a founding member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), decided to leave the organisation. In 2004, the Andean Community determined that individual member states could negotiate trade agreements with extra-regional partners, ending all but the name of its customs union. We will call these types of disintegration authority demotion, territorial retrenchment, and policy dismantling. Neither of these outcomes was predetermined, nor were they foreseen in the treaties at the time of joining. Eventually, none of these outcomes meant the end of the respective organisation.

In contrast, when six members of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) suspended their participation in 2018 and left shortly afterwards, the organisation broke down. The heads of state of its remaining members never reconvened. This process of disintegration can be understood as integration in reverse: an organisation is created when states join and dissolved when states leave. However, the three previous cases suggest that other, more nuanced, complex processes occur. First, disintegration may be driven by different causes and can take many paths. For instance, of all international organisations that ceased to exist in the past two centuries, less than one-third were formally dissolved (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020).

A considerable number were succeeded by other organisations, merged or absorbed, while twenty-two per cent simply went defunct. Second, disintegration does not need to be wholesale. Third, and most importantly, the paths and causes of disintegration are not necessarily the mirror version of integration, as early research on disintegration suggested (see De Lombaerde et al., 2021, pp. 6–7).

Even if integration and disintegration are asymmetric in that their drivers differ, the former offers a necessary starting point to comprehend and theorise the latter. Haas (1971, p. 6) defined integration as a “process of how and why nation-states voluntarily mingle, merge and mix with their neighbours so as to lose the factual attributes of sovereignty while acquiring new techniques for resolving conflicts among themselves”. Schmitter (2004) added that creating common and permanent institutions capable of making decisions binding on all members is essential. This definition has six components, of which three are fixed, and three are variable.

The fixed components are process, neighbourhood and voluntariness. *Process* means that integration is open-ended. In contrast to states, regional organisations are not in a stable equilibrium: not only do they eventually evolve, but they are expected to do so—with no predictable direction. *Neighbourhood* refers to the fact that geographical contiguity, or at least proximity, determines whether an integration process is regional. *Voluntariness* differentiates regional integration from other processes of political unification, such as military conquest or economic purchase.

The variable components of the definition are membership, policymaking authority, and policy scope. *Membership* establishes which states take part in the integration process. *Policymaking authority* refers to the degree of power that is transferred from the member states to the regional institutions. *Policy scope* indicates the number of policy areas whose jurisdiction is transferred from the member states to the regional institutions.

In terms of membership, the formal termination of regional organisations and the withdrawal of individual members both occur on an infrequent basis (Gray, 2018, p. 3), although they tend to be momentous (Closa, 2017). Concerning the level of *policy authority*, a prominent example is the weakening of the European Commission in the aftermath of the Empty Chair crisis. As a consequence of the ensuing 1966 Luxembourg Compromise, the Commission was obliged to seek the European Council’s approval on several policy measures. The Commission was further discouraged from proposing deeper integration policies as de facto veto power was given to member states on topics that were deemed to affect key national interests (Schmidt, 2000). Regarding *policy dismantling* in terms of *scope*, this is a process mostly studied at the national level. However, cases have also been recorded at the EU level, especially regarding agricultural and environmental policies (Brandsma et al., 2023; Lenschow et al., 2020).

The three variable components have been identified by recent work on disintegration in the EU. Pircher and Loxbo (2020), for instance, studied one form of policy dismantling when they examined non-compliance with EU law. Schimmelfennig distinguished all three axes by differentiating the “level, scope, and membership of integration” (Schimmelfennig, 2017). Similarly, Webber (2019) referred to horizontal, sectoral and vertical disintegration, which are defined as a reduction in

membership, areas of cooperation, and supranational bodies' competencies, respectively. Yet, no comprehensive theoretical framework has been put forth to capture different types of disintegration and their causes. In 2014, Scheller and Eppler wrote that "research on disintegration is so poor that there are hardly any definitions, not to mention theory-based explanations of the interplay between integrative and disintegrative developments in the EU" (2014, p. 5). They proposed an approach to disintegration that takes into consideration the erosion of legitimacy and decreasing levels of economic integration (Scheller & Eppler, 2014, pp. 25–26). This move is useful but insufficient if one is to understand disintegration as a product of political decisions and not only structural processes devoid of agency.

Disintegration and integration are not mutually exclusive, unlike Jones (2018) suggests. A dichotomous conceptualisation ignores that simultaneous moves towards disintegration or integration condition each other, such as when the withdrawal of a reluctant member prompts the remaining states to upgrade their commitment to integration (Panke et al., 2025; von Borzyskowski & Vabulas, 2024). Thus, integration and disintegration may proceed simultaneously along orthogonal axes.

Based on the literature discussed, together with empirical observations from cases of regional disintegration, Table 1 lists twenty different types of disintegration that regional organisations may experience along the three axes. To this end, a regional organisation is defined as a formal entity with (i) at least three geographically contiguous member states, (ii) a secretariat, headquarters or permanent staff, (iii) regular plenary sessions at least once every five years, and (iv) a formal founding treaty or another legal instrument that gives it standing under international law.¹

A Sequential Framework of Integration and Disintegration

A framework to explain the asymmetric but potentially parallel processes of integration and disintegration needs to capture both national and regional-level factors. We propose a sequential framework that distinguishes four stages: national motivations to join or withdraw (the independent variable), mediation through domestic institutions (intervening variable), national decision (the dependent variable) and regional outcome (indirect dependent variable).

Actors design institutions purposefully based on a calculation of costs and benefits. Even if it can be argued that "integration and disintegration are not necessarily products of deliberate decisions" (Zielonka, 2014, p. 31), sooner or later, policymakers will be confronted with the choice of whether and how to react to external events and unforeseen effects. Specifically, and in line with the above, national authorities make three types of decisions regarding the pooling of sovereignty: membership, level of authority, and policy scope. These outcomes translate into two characteristics of regional organisations that are to be explained: size and shape—or function.

¹ The definition draws on one of the intergovernmental organisations by Pevehouse et al., (2020, p. 2) and Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2021).

Table 1 Types and cases of regional disintegration

		Types	Cases
Termination (full disintegration)		1. Expiry	European Coal and Steel Community (2002)
		2. Dissolution	Latin Union (2012), Asian and Pacific Council (1973), East African Community/Common Market (1977)
		3. Succession	Union of American Republics—Organisation of American States (1948), LAFTA-LAIA (1980), Organisation for African Unity—African Union (2001)
		4. Merger/Absorption	ELDO-ESRO (1975)
		5. Desuetude	Permanent Secretariat of the South American Agreement on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1998)
Differentiated disintegration	Territorial retrenchment	1. Withdrawal	Brexit (2020), Chile from AC (1976), Mauritania from ECOWAS (2000), Uzbekistan from GUUAM (2005), Morocco from the Organisation of African Unity (1984)
		2. Opting out (formal)	Denmark from euro
		3. Opting out (subterfuge)	Sweden from euro
		4. Suspension/expulsion	Paraguay (2012) and Venezuela (2017) from Mercosur; Mali (2020), Guinea (2021) and Burkina Faso (2022) from ECOWAS; several from African Union: CAR 2013–2016; Egypt 2013–2014; Guinea 2008–2011, 2021; Guinea-Bissau 2012–2014; Ivory Coast 2010–2011; Madagascar 2001–2003, 2009–2014; Mali 2012–13, 2020, 2021; Mauritania 2005–2007, 2008; Niger 2010, 2023; Sudan 2019, Togo 2005
		5. Secession	Algeria (1962) and Greenland (1985) from EC/EU; East Timor from ASEAN (2002)
	Authority demotion	1. Termination	Mercosur High Representative (2017)
		2. Downgrading	EC High Authority (1966)

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

		Types	Cases
		3. Blockade	France during Empty Chair crisis
		4. Overruling	German Court over EU (2020)
		5. Non-compliance	CET double collection in Mercosur
	Policy dismantling	1. Termination	Western European Union (2011)
		2. Defunding	CAP (incrementally)
		3. Bypass (formal)	AC customs unity (2004)
		4. Bypass (non-enforcement)	Parlasur (2014)
		5. Non-incorporation	Mercosur (see Arnold, 2017)

Source Authors’ elaboration with inputs from Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2020, 2021) and Schmitter (1970)

To account for national decisions, we draw eclectically on theories of regional integration, mainly neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism, thereby integrating the basic factors proposed by the main schools of International Relations into the framework: material power, as emphasised by realism; economic interests, as highlighted by liberalism; and identities, as accounted for by constructivism.

Neofunctionalism is a theory developed by Ernst Haas around the 1960s to account for processes of transnational integration (Haas, 1958, 1964). It drew on functionalism, an earlier approach advocated by David Mitrany (1943), whose pitfalls were the neglect of political and geographical factors. The neofunctionalist approach argued that “what matters most is a utilitarian calculus on the part of actors and not a dramatic or passionate commitment to a new order” (Haas, 1975, p. 12). The theory conceived of integration as an open process driven by economic interests and characterised by the spillover from one policy area to another.

Spillover is the process whereby “a given action, related to a specific goal, creates a situation in which the original goal can be assured only by taking further actions, which in turn create a further condition and a need for more, and so forth” (Lindberg, 1963, p. 9). The notion is that integration in one sector will create interests and hence incentives for integration in other sectors and further delegation of authority in the same sector. Although neofunctionalism was sensitive to the difference between background, initial, and process conditions, it “had more to say about the ongoing role of institutions than about the factors that explain the birth of regionalist schemes” (Hurrell, 1995, p. 60): its main accent and stronger predictions focused on the process. Once integration had started, neofunctionalism saw it being fostered by two sorts of spillover: functional and political, as in their view, politicisation was initially avoidable but later inescapable. Hence, functionality had a positive effect on integration, while politicisation had a negative effect. In other words, functionality was deemed to foster integration while politicisation was feared to foster disintegration: different drivers fed each process.

Over time, however, spillover did not occur as expected. What first appeared as an almost mechanical process towards further European integration changed afterwards into an extremely contingent phenomenon. The geopolitical considerations of European elites had an indeterminate effect on decisions over integration. De Gaulle's unforeseen challenge to the deepening of European integration was decisive for Haas's (1975) theoretical reformulation: henceforth, the role that individuals could play, especially when embedded in powerful institutions, was independent of the dynamics of integration. Haas began to stress the role of ideas and *consensual knowledge*, factors that are best explained by constructivist approaches, paying increasing attention to the relevance of political leaders and their goals, which are likewise influenced by power politics.

Neofunctionalism's concern with politicisation, ideas and common knowledge was later taken up in Hooghe and Marks's post-functionalist theory (2009). To explain aspects of European integration that neofunctionalism (and intergovernmentalism) could not account for, such as growing politicisation and the disintegrating impact of national referenda, the authors argue that identities—not only interests—are crucial drivers of European integration dynamics. If local identities are exclusive of others and successfully mobilised by political parties that feed them into the decision-making process, identities can overrule the interests that would prompt further integration and even halt or reverse it. Therefore, identities can be expected to play a crucial role in limiting integration and even setting off disintegration processes.

Taken together, while neofunctionalism is well equipped to explain integration by focusing on the satisfaction of interests by size augmentation, post-functionalism works better at explaining the limits of integration—and the potential of disintegration—by focusing on the clashes derived from an increasing heterogeneity of identities.

In sum, a sequential framework that brings together diverse theoretical insights on the creation and evolution of regional organisations accounts for integration and disintegration processes by studying the influence of three drivers—power, interests and identities—on national decision-making regarding three dimensions: membership, level of authority, and policy scope. At the regional level, the decisions by individual states translate into an organisation defined by size and functions. The intervening variable of institutions, both domestic and regional, is not developed here for reasons of space but is crucial to explaining how the motivations of political elites are translated into decision-making (see Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2020). As the size and functions of regional organisations grow, we expect power to have an indeterminate effect, interests to foster integration impulses, and identities to feed disintegration dynamics.

Conclusions

The quagmire of Brexit, the waiver conceded to the Andean Community member states to simultaneously belong to other customs unions, as well as the massive abandonment of UNASUR and, more recently, ECOWAS,² are not eccentricities but examples of a wider, global phenomenon: regional disintegration, sometimes manifested as differentiated disintegration (see Gänzle et al., 2024). However, disintegration is not just integration in reverse. Hence, it is plausible that integration advances in one dimension while disintegration proceeds in another: the level of authority, policy scope and membership of an organisation can evolve in opposing directions. If so, how do integration and disintegration relate to changing global governance? One of the first scholars to call attention towards issues of integration reversibility was Schmitter (1970), a self-aware and critical pioneer of neofunctionalism. In recent years, the debate on disintegration has blossomed, and yet our theoretical understanding is still in its infancy. To move forward, future research should employ an eclectic approach, including insights from mainstream theorising but also revisiting its limitations and building on a broad empirical basis from different regions.

In particular, the failure of supranationalism to take root outside Europe, combined with the four-fold crisis of the European Union (Brexit, migration, the Euro, and populist authoritarianism), should prompt a revaluation of our notions of size and politics. Key recent thinkers are Alesina and Spolaore (2003) and Colomer (2007), but the pioneers were Dahl and Tufte (1973). The most important lesson of their work is that big and small are not symmetric: the factors that fuel expansion (aka integration) are not the same as those that bring about contraction (aka fragmentation or disintegration). This raises questions not only about the ineluctability of regional integration but, more broadly, about the pertinence of symmetry to make sense of the world.

In Latin America, the idea of regionalism—understood as a common identity—has been present throughout history, but integration—understood as shared sovereignty—has remained elusive. Heads of state have looked for opportunities to get together, reinforce inter-presidential links of solidarity, and manipulate regional means to domestic ends (Malamud, 2014). However, they remain reluctant to share sovereignty with other states—as much as they have been reluctant to share competencies with domestic institutions. For liberals and neofunctionalists, the main reason for the failure of integration has been the low level of regional interdependence, which made regional coordination dispensable. For constructivists, fragmentation can be overcome through identity-building. For realists, the failure of integration does not need explanation. In this contribution, we advanced an eclectic framework building on insights from each paradigm and suggested that realist drivers (power) are indeterminate, depending on whether motivations are offensive or defensive; liberal/

² In 2024 Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali announced their withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a decision which—unless revoked—will be effective within one year.

neofunctional drivers (interests) tend to foster integration; and constructivist/post-functional drivers (identities) tend to foster disintegration. This is a consequence of increasing size fostering internal heterogeneity. If our hypotheses hold against empirical scrutiny, neofunctionalism and post-functionalism will be proven as effective theories to explain opposite but potentially intertwined processes.

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Essay 21: To What Extent Are Diffusion Theories and Mainstream Theories of Regional Integration Complementary? The Contribution of Sociological Institutionalism to the Study of Regional Organisations Beyond the European Union



Federico Rojas-de-Galarreta

Introduction

The 1990s witnessed a surge in both the literature on regionalism and the creation of new regional organisations worldwide (Börzel & Risse, 2016; De Lombaerde et al., 2010). During this period, regionalism and its associated literature expanded significantly. Notably, although most regional organisations were created outside Europe, many of the theories drew on the European experience; therefore, they are Eurocentric (Acharya, 2016).

Over time, it became evident that there was a mismatch between mainstream theory and real-world cases, especially from the Global South: many of the cases did not match theoretical expectations, and many of the theories failed to explain observed phenomena (Börzel & Risse, 2019; Hooghe & Marks, 2019). A particularly paradoxical situation arose in many regional organisations, where the delegation of authority to supranational institutions increased steadily, despite a relatively low *demand for integration*, according to mainstream literature (Hooghe et al., 2017).

One response to this theoretical puzzle came from sociological institutionalism, which laid the groundwork for diffusion theories (Risse, 2016). Building on sociological institutionalism, diffusion theories claim that decisions to adopt new institutional characteristics are interdependent rather than independent (Elkins & Simmons, 2005; Strang & Meyer, 1993). That is, they are based on decisions previously made

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by others. The diffusion approach emphasises spatial and temporal interdependencies as key factors in explaining institutional models (Risse, 2016; Solingen, 2012). It argues that delegated institutions, such as courts or parliaments, are not purely endogenous or functional creations, since States and regional organisations consider what has been done by others to make their own decisions (Lenz & Marks, 2016).

Due to their explanatory power, these theories have become increasingly influential in the literature, coexisting with and challenging mainstream theories of regional integration. This raises a pivotal question that guides this essay: To what extent are diffusion theories and mainstream theories of regional integration complementary? I argue that while the two sets of theories are competitive, they can also be applied in a complementary manner. Diffusion theories introduce exogenous and interdependent factors, such as the influence of relevant organisations, which are usually omitted by mainstream theories of regional integration, thereby reducing bias. However, it is crucial to consider the ontological and epistemological differences when integrating these diverse theories into our explanations.

In this essay, I argue in favour of theoretical complementarity, advocating for a theoretically eclectic approach grounded in pragmatism to address the theoretical puzzles presented by regionalism. First, I introduce both mainstream and diffusion theories of regional integration. Second, I assess potential complementarities and obstacles to integration. Finally, I outline potential lines of research that could be explored, contributing to a deeper reflection on the relevance of mainstream theorising.

Mainstream and Diffusion Theories of Regional Integration

After the Second World War, a novel process started in Western Europe: states began to slowly merge their sovereignties and transfer some of their authorities to supranational institutions (Haas, 1970; Rosamond, 2000; Tinbergen, 1954). As the first modern example of regional integration, this project attracted interdisciplinary interest. The theories and frameworks in European integration literature were created originally to explain its emergence, institutional features, or effects. Consequently, most theories on regional integration were actually theories on European regional integration.

Early theories focused on internal dynamics. With a few geopolitical exceptions, such as the influence of the United States or the presence of the Soviet Union (Arnason, 2019), these theories generally do not mention factors exogenous to Europe. Transactionalism is one of the first attempts at an integration theory (Deutsch et al., 1957). This approach examined how communication and transactions at the social level could lead to a sense of community among nations, strong enough to ensure mutual expectations of peaceful change. Functionalism also defended that most of the international problems were essentially technical and could be dealt with by non-political experts. Thus, integration is seen as an institutional solution to a functional problem (Mitrany, 1966). Neofunctionalism (Haas, 1970, 2008) retained

functionalist principles but reintroduced politics, framing integration as driven by functional and societal demands, with regional interdependence as a key condition. It was the first comprehensive integration theory, linking societal demand with institutional outcomes.

Liberal intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik, 1998) offered a state-centred rationalist approach, emphasising domestic actors and economic interdependence as necessary but insufficient for integration. Unlike neofunctionalism, it prioritised leaders and states aggregating domestic preferences in negotiations. Institutional adoption stemmed from maintaining credible agreements, assuming supranational bodies resolve incomplete contracts (Moravcsik, 1998, p. 485).

Mattli (1999) synthesised European theories from a rational choice perspective, distinguishing demand-side (regional interdependence) and supply-side (political willingness and leadership) conditions. He argued that transnational actors push for integration to reduce transaction costs, but success requires regional poles with the capability to internalise costs. This assumption aligns with hegemonic stability theory (Gilpin, 1987; Kindleberger, 1986), which links power asymmetry to integration leadership.

There has been an attempt to incorporate exogenous factors into recent developments in the literature, focusing on the impact of changes in the international system's structure on regionalism, especially those examining the effects of a multipolar structure on regional integration. However, this literature primarily highlights how these changes indirectly influence the classic drivers of integration (demand and supply). Although these are exogenous factors, they are at a higher level of analysis than the region. While some authors argue that a multipolar structure has cohesive effects on regions and regionalism (Acharya, 2009; Acharya & Johnston, 2007), other authors expect the opposite in most cases (Garzón, 2016; Krapohl, 2017). According to the second perspective, the existence of multiple poles generates centrifugal dynamics in the regions, reducing interdependence and generating incentives towards *light* forms of regionalism that do not imply integration.

These theories had great difficulty in explaining trends, such as the sustained increase in the levels of delegation of authority to regional organisations beyond the European Union, based only on endogenous factors. The regionalist literature recently highlighted this (Börzel & Risse, 2019; Hooghe & Marks, 2019; Rojas-de-Galarreta, 2021). The excessive focus on the European experience led to the discarding of exogenous factors and thus to a loss of explanatory power, which led to the search for new options such as those offered by sociological institutionalism.

The Contribution of Diffusion Theories

The concept of diffusion originates not from International Relations but from sociology (Strang, 1991; Strang & Meyer, 1993). Diffusion involves the spread of something within a particular environment, which can be an innovation, an idea, a rule,

or an organisation, among other examples. In all instances, diffusion implies movement—whether it is a material or immaterial object moving from one place to another or being communicated from one actor to another (Rogers, 2003). That is why it is often said that diffusion refers to how these objects of study *travel*. To say that something diffuses is to indicate that it moves from one location to another. However, diffusion is not necessarily an outcome, but a process associated with a potential outcome (Elkins & Simmons, 2005).

The main ontological difference between mainstream theories of regional integration and diffusion theories is that diffusion theories do not assume independence among units. Instead, they are based on the notion of interdependence (Gilardi, 2012). In other words, the decisions of one entity are influenced by the decisions of others. Diffusion is thus understood as “any process where prior adoption of a trait or practice in a population alters the probability of adoption for remaining nonadopters” (Strang, 1991, p. 325). This results in the inclusion of exogenous factors in the region in the explanation of the levels of regional integration (Lenz, 2021).

Diffusion research initially focused on the introduction and adoption of innovations across various fields of study (Elkins & Simmons, 2005). In the case of International Relations, diffusion initially focused on norms diffusion (Acharya, 2004; Gilardi, 2012; Greenhill, 2010; Grugel, 2007; Jetschke, 2022) and policy diffusion (Gilardi, 2010; Meseguer & Gilardi, 2009; Simmons & Elkins, 2004; Simmons et al., 2008). This literature focuses on how norms or policies travel between international actors, such as regions, countries, organisations, or individuals. This early literature has developed many notions about mechanisms that have later been applied to the study of the diffusion of institutional designs, which has been the most developed area for theories of diffusion in the literature on regionalism and regional integration.

As Risse (2016) argues, theories of diffusion are well suited to offer a better account with regard to “similarities and differences in some of the institutional design of REOs and particularly concerning the trend towards delegation of authority” (Risse, 2016, p. 636). They argue that delegated institutions—such as courts or parliaments—are not purely endogenous or functional creations, since States and regional organisations consider what has been done by others in order to make their own decisions (Lenz & Marks, 2016). Diffusion theories are characterised by emphasising interdependencies—regional, cross-regional, and global—to explain institutional models (Börzel & Risse, 2019; Solingen, 2012). This literature shows that functional or material incentives are not the only incentives in town. Certainly, decision-makers are driven by incentives and constraints, but politics goes far beyond material or functional incentives. There are also symbolic or reputational incentives that can generate benefits for member states.

Based on its explanatory power for multiple cases beyond the European Union, diffusion has gained space in the literature on regional integration. So far, both mainstream theories of regional integration and diffusion theories have coexisted as alternative explanations for each other. Let us examine in depth whether this complementarity is theoretically and methodologically possible.

Can There Be Complementarity?

Since their emergence, diffusion theories have gained prominence in the literature, primarily because they offer empirically robust solutions to puzzles that mainstream theory could not explain, such as the increasing delegation of authority in regional organisations. They also engage critically with mainstream theories, acknowledging both their limitations and contributions.

The potential complementarity between mainstream and diffusion theories lies in their ability to capture different dimensions of regional integration. While mainstream theories focus on endogenous factors, such as economic interdependence, societal demand, or intergovernmental bargaining, diffusion theories emphasise exogenous influences, including policy emulation, external actors, and international normative pressures. These theories explain how integration models spread and why certain institutional forms become dominant. Yet, they often overlook domestic political and economic conditions that shape whether diffusion results in institutionalisation or remains superficial.

Exploring complementarity enhances the field's explanatory power: integrating endogenous and exogenous factors allows scholars to account for the interaction between global and regional dynamics. Moreover, recent trends in regionalism do not always fit neatly within traditional models. Regional organisations today exhibit varied forms—some resembling the EU, others favouring flexible, issue-based cooperation. Considering both internal political economies and external mechanisms helps explain why some regions pursue deeper integration while others prefer looser arrangements. Additionally, understanding the interplay of domestic and external drivers is crucial for designing effective institutions. A focus solely on endogenous factors risks missing opportunities offered by international cooperation, while overreliance on diffusion may overlook local political realities. A complementary approach offers a more balanced foundation for policymaking.

To address the question posed in this essay's title, I examine two key perspectives: theoretical and methodological. The theoretical discussion identifies similarities and divergences between the two approaches. The methodological perspective assesses whether these theories are incommensurable or can be integrated into a broader framework.

Theoretically, a key distinction is that diffusion theories assume interdependence between regions or organisations, while mainstream theories often do not. However, incorporating exogenous factors in theorising about integration is not mutually exclusive. Diffusion theories suggest including horizontal exogenous factors alongside existing endogenous ones to address current puzzles, rather than rejecting mainstream insights. For instance, Rojas-de-Galarreta (forthcoming) shows how Global South organisations like MERCOSUR and the Andean Community selectively adapt external institutional models. His work emphasises the role of domestic actors in filtering external influences through perceptions of legitimacy, fit, and utility. Likewise, Lenz and Burilkov (2017) highlight how organisations in Africa and Latin America emulate the EU's institutional designs. These studies illustrate how

combining exogenous mechanisms with endogenous explanations leads to a more complete understanding of regional institutions.

Methodologically, complementarity requires tracing how diffusion mechanisms, like emulation, coercion, or learning, interact with domestic factors. This calls for comparative analysis, case studies, and process tracing to understand the causal relationship between external influence and local adaptation. A comprehensive framework should assess how models diffuse globally and under what conditions they are internalised or modified through selective adaptation (Risse, 2016). Epistemologically, diffusion theories share the positivist assumptions of mainstream integration theory. They use common theoretical standards and language, making integration feasible. While much of the diffusion literature relies on qualitative methods, there are comparative (Alter, 2012; Jetschke & Murray, 2012) and quantitative studies as well (Lenz, 2021; Rojas-de-Galarreta, 2021).

Methodological complementarity is essential to capture the multi-causal, layered nature of regional institutions. Single-method approaches may obscure complexity by privileging one logic. In contrast, mixed-method designs illuminate how internal and external drivers co-produce outcomes and how diffusion interacts with domestic structures. Methodology also shapes what we can observe. Case-oriented process tracing can show how global models are contested locally, while comparative designs can reveal regional patterns of convergence or divergence. Crucially, open methodological designs allow for theoretical dialogue rather than exclusion. A reflexive stance is essential for uncovering the layered realities of regionalism and building context-sensitive theory.

While mainstream theories provide important insights into the emergence and development of regional organisations, they struggle to account for regions beyond the EU. One key bias is their origin in *centre* experiences—more often shaping than being shaped by others, which leads to an underestimation of exogenous influences. In contrast, Global South regions face different dynamics, where external factors play a larger role. Yet diffusion theories, while addressing those gaps, remain limited by focusing mostly on the spread of norms and institutions. They do not offer a full explanation of regionalism but usefully complement mainstream accounts. Their value lies in highlighting what traditional theories have overlooked. By incorporating exogenous factors, such as inter-organisational emulation and norm diffusion, these approaches help mitigate Eurocentric bias. If we aim for a truly global understanding of regionalism, these dimensions must be included in our frameworks.

Conclusion

This essay argued for the complementarity between diffusion theories and mainstream theories of regional integration as a means to mitigate the Eurocentric bias prevalent in the literature. The inclusion of exogenous factors, as proposed by diffusion theories, enables a more comprehensive explanation of the dynamics of regions and regional organisations beyond the European Union. To advance the literature

on comparative regionalism toward a more global perspective, it is essential to incorporate theoretical frameworks that account for the specific dynamics of so-called *peripheral* cases, particularly processes such as diffusion and decoupling. This approach does not discard mainstream theories but rather integrates the factors they have omitted, taking into account the realities of other regions.

Following Lake (2013), I call for theoretical eclecticism to guide our work through relevant research questions. Empirical puzzles can be approached using theoretical elements from different perspectives. How and where? Although institutional design diffusion in regional organisations of the Global South is a key area, it remains underexplored both theoretically and empirically. Recent studies highlight the EU's strong influence in this phenomenon (Lenz, 2021), but further research is needed to understand how these institutions actually function. In this field, methodological integration—particularly the use of quantitative analyses—is also relevant, even if only to generate insights that are later deepened qualitatively. Although diffusion is difficult to *measure*, we should not discard quantitative methods.

Building on the insights gained from this essay, several avenues for future research can be identified. First, conducting comparative studies that explore how diffusion mechanisms operate differently across regional contexts, especially those involving emerging and shifting powers. For instance, comparing the Caribbean Community and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States may reveal how diffusion is mediated by regional power configurations and strategic objectives. Second, exploring the temporal dynamics of diffusion processes can provide insights into how and when certain norms, policies, or institutional designs are adopted by regional organisations. A comparison between MERCOSUR and the Andean Community, for example, reveals contrasting trajectories in the adoption of supranational institutions, despite similar exposure to European integration models, underscoring how historical timing, domestic politics, and leadership choices condition the pace and direction of diffusion. Finally, analysing the role of non-state actors, such as international organisations, transnational networks, and civil society groups, in shaping diffusion processes. For example, the involvement of think tanks and advocacy coalitions in shaping the African Union's governance agenda highlights how ideational and normative pressures often originate beyond state actors.

By pursuing these avenues of research, scholars can continue to advance the field of global regionalism, contributing to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of regional integration in diverse contexts.

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Essay 22: Customs Union Theory in the Current Phase of International Trade Relations



P. Lelio Iapadre

Introduction: Regional Integration and the Slowdown of Globalisation

Following the financial crisis of 2008–2009, the world economy entered a phase of great instability, characterised by shocks and recoveries, now further aggravated by the wave of conflicts and political tensions fuelled by the rising tide of nationalistic ideologies and identitarian obsessions.

The process of globalisation, which has stimulated economic growth and reduced international income inequality, contributing to an unprecedented fall in poverty rates in several developing countries, appears to be fatigued (UNCTAD, 2024). The expansion of trade in goods and services has slowed, aligning itself with the growth of production. The flow of foreign direct investment (FDI) has entered a downward trend. International production networks have probably reached a stage beyond which further expansion of their geographical scope is not profitable. Even before the United States launched its aggressive trade war in early 2025, trade policies worldwide had become more restrictive. Globalisation is often scapegoated to justify protectionist measures, rather than addressing the underlying regressive fiscal and social policies that are driving rising inequalities within countries.

These trends appear particularly dangerous when considering the formidable challenges facing the international community, including climate change, the risk of new pandemics, demographic and migration trends, and the digital transformation of economies and societies. While it should be clear that there is no way to seriously address these challenges without sharing sovereignty in supranational institutions, the United Nations-based multilateral system is in deep crisis, and the deadlock of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), 30 years after its inception, is one of its most visible economic signs.

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In this context, the importance of regional integration appears higher than ever, as a possible alternative strategy to strengthen international cooperation and pave the way for a future revival of the multilateral system. This is even more true in the case of trade, where regional integration agreements (RIAs) have often provided opportunities to experiment with liberalisation policies, while better acknowledging the different needs of developing and developed countries.

The customs union theory, proposed by Jacob Viner (1950), is widely regarded as the most important starting point for the economic analysis of regional trade integration. This essay will discuss the main insights of the theory to better understand its relevance to the current debate on regionalism and the multilateral trading system. It will argue that, despite its limitations, Viner's theory can still shed light on the economic effects of regional trade integration, which are also valuable in regional contexts other than Europe.

The essay begins by summarising the main conclusions of Viner's theory and proceeds by discussing its limitations and the literature that has sought to overcome them, considering the role of economies of scale and imperfect competition and the dynamic benefits of trade liberalisation. The subsequent section addresses the relevance of customs union theory for deeper forms of regional integration, such as economic and monetary unions. The concluding remarks seek to connect the previous theoretical debate to the still open policy questions regarding the relationship between regionalism and multilateralism.

Customs Union Theory: The Traditional Specification

In a world that is still characterised by a significant—and increasing—level of trade restrictions, there is a widespread belief that the removal of tariffs and other trade barriers on a regional basis, even if less effective than multilateral liberalisation, can still be considered a beneficial process. Apparently, one might think that the elimination of trade barriers in a discriminatory way, even if it is not the optimal choice, improves the overall situation, in the sense that preferential liberalisation would still reduce existing distortions in international markets.

It can be said that this view of regionalism was the dominant one among economists before 1950, that is, until the Canadian economist Jacob Viner questioned its validity. Viner's analysis showed that the impact of an RIA on the welfare of member countries depends on the specific characteristics of the agreement and, in particular, on the prevalence of *trade creation* effects over *trade diversion* effects. Trade creation occurs when, following the preferential removal of trade barriers between members of an RIA, a domestic supplier within a country is replaced by a more efficient supplier from another country that is a member of the agreement. Therefore, trade creation is considered an improvement in the allocation of resources, which leads to greater specialisation of countries and increases their economic welfare. The second effect, trade diversion, i.e. a change in the geographical direction of trade, consists in the replacement of a more efficient supplier located outside

the integrated area with a less efficient supplier within the area. Trade diversion is considered detrimental to resource allocation and economic well-being.

Viner's theory, which was based on an analysis of past experiences of customs unions and in particular of the German *Zollverein* (1834–1866), relies on the simple assumptions of partial equilibrium trade models under perfect competition. Over time, the vast debate generated by the different experiences of regional trade integration around the world has allowed us to overcome the limitations of Viner's approach and to better understand the issues at stake. Meade's book (1955) incorporated Viner's contribution into a welfare economics model, showing more precisely the conditions for trade creation to prevail over trade diversion. However, even when these conditions are met, Lipsey (1957) rigorously explained why preferential trade agreements do not necessarily improve welfare, linking Viner's intuition to the "general theory of the second best" (Lipsey & Lancaster, 1956). Furthermore, the Kemp and Wan theorem (1976) defined the conditions under which the damage caused to third countries by the trade diversion effects of customs unions can be neutralised by the adoption of a common external tariff lower than the one in force before the establishment of the customs union.

The continuing relevance of Viner's contribution can also be seen in a different context. The slowdown in globalisation, which has become clearly visible since the 2008–2009 financial crisis, has both cyclical and structural explanations. One of the most striking transformations evident in the data is the significant reduction in external openness, as measured by import penetration and export propensity, in the major emerging Asian economies over the past two decades. This trend is partly attributable to the transition of emerging Asian economies to a development phase where domestic demand becomes the main driver of growth, mirroring patterns previously observed in advanced economies such as the Eurozone, Japan, and the United States. However, structural changes in trade patterns have also played a decisive role (Guy, 2015). Empirical studies suggest that improved domestic infrastructure and regulatory reforms may have stimulated a *domestic trade creation* effect, similar to the international trade creation effect theorised by Viner in the context of customs unions. In China, the internal corridors of the *Belt and Road Initiative* (e.g., high-speed rail networks) have enhanced hinterland-coastal integration (Maliszewska & van der Mensbrugghe, 2019). Similarly, India's 2017 Goods and Services Tax (GST) reform reduced interstate trade barriers, increasing domestic trade volumes (Jain, 2024), while Indonesia's transport investments significantly increased domestic trade (Verico & Qibthiyyah, 2023). These developments may have facilitated domestic trade flows at the expense of foreign trade intensity. Initially, this shift affected intra-regional trade ties more severely than inter-regional trade, partly because China's growing global role mitigated the impact on the latter. More recently, regional trade has shown signs of recovery (Akman et al., 2022), also reflecting geopolitical factors.

Regional Trade Integration Under Imperfect Competition

One of the most significant advances beyond Viner's static customs union theory came with Bela Balassa's (1961) book *The Theory of Economic Integration*. While Viner assumed perfect competition, Balassa explicitly considered the possible effects of trade liberalisation on market power and the degree of competition, taking into account the role of economies of scale. On the one hand, removing trade barriers in the customs union could increase the number of firms competing in each national market, which would have beneficial effects for consumers in terms of lower markups and a wider range of product varieties. On the other hand, increasing market size allows for better exploitation of economies of scale, creating incentives for growth in firm size and market concentration. The interaction between these opposing forces is complex (see e.g. Melitz & Ottaviano, 2008) and its outcome is difficult to predict. The resulting risks for the degree of competition are also visible in the European Union (Calligaris et al., 2024).

Indeed, another important issue on which the traditional theory of customs unions requires updating concerns the role of competition policies, which are essential to ensure the full release of the benefits of trade liberalisation and prevent an excessive level of market concentration. This explains why a specific and important feature of the European Single Market, present since its inception, is the close coordination of the competition policies of the member countries, achieved through the establishment of common principles to which national authorities must comply, and the attribution to the European Commission of powers of direct intervention in this field, and in particular in preventing the formation of excessively strong market concentrations, as well as in the fight against anti-competitive practices, abuses of dominant positions and the regulation of State aid (Szczeпаński, 2019). The underlying idea is that the proper functioning of the Single Market requires not only the elimination of border barriers and discriminatory rules that limit international trade, but also the removal of possible distortions resulting from anti-competitive practices of companies or public subsidies.

Dynamic Gains from Trade and Regional Integration

Another important contribution of Balassa (1961) was the introduction of dynamic gains from integration, including its effects on investment, innovation and productivity. His work provided a framework to explain why regional integration could generate growth effects beyond Viner's static model. The literature on the possible impact of trade liberalisation on economic growth is very large and is supported by a wide range of empirical studies, which show that open economies tend to grow faster than countries characterised by a high degree of protection (OECD, 1999).

However, this statement must be put into a proper historical perspective. As shown, among others, by Chang (2003), at the beginning of their development process, all

major advanced economies were characterised by protectionist policies, which were gradually dismantled only after domestic enterprises had reached a sufficient level of productivity and competitiveness, in a stable institutional and macroeconomic context. A similar gradual approach could be recommended for developing countries in order to prevent the risk that a sharp liberalisation of trade policies would not allow the growth of their *infant* industries, or would activate processes of *premature deindustrialisation* (Rodrik, 2016). In this framework, regional integration among a group of protected developing countries could expand the size of their domestic markets, facilitating the exploitation of economies of scale and the gradual development of their comparative advantages.

The driving force behind dynamic gains from trade is the competitive selection process activated by trade liberalisation. In a model with heterogeneous firms, international market integration tends to favour the most innovative and productive firms, which grow and expand their market shares at the expense of weaker competitors (Melitz, 2003). This process is circular and cumulative, since on the one hand, only the most productive firms are able to operate successfully in international markets, and on the other hand, their initial competitive advantage over firms that only operate in domestic markets is further strengthened by learning-by-trading experiences. The resulting macroeconomic impact is an increase in the average productivity of the economy, which translates into higher growth rates.

When this general approach is applied to customs unions and other forms of regional integration, its main insights remain valid but must be qualified by distinguishing between RIA member countries and the rest of the world. The dynamic benefits of trade liberalisation, which arise from the trade-creation effects described by Viner's static model, accrue primarily to the members of the customs union. The resulting growth benefits, combined with the attempt to prevent the damage inflicted by the external spillovers of trade diversion, can help explain the *domino effect* described by Baldwin (1995), which leads neighbouring third countries to seek membership in regional integration organisations.

However, the impact of RIAs on third countries is not uniformly negative. As Viner had already noted, the income growth generated by trade creation within a customs union can stimulate demand for imports from non-member states, a phenomenon called *external trade creation*. This occurs when efficiency gains and economic expansion within the RIA lead to increased imports of goods and services from external partners (De la Torre & Kelly, 1992). Recent studies point out that external trade creation often outweighs trade diversion when RIAs maintain low external tariffs and promote complementary economic relationships (Mattoo et al., 2022). For example, the European Union's single market has increased intra-bloc trade while simultaneously increasing imports from Asia and Africa, particularly in manufactured goods and raw materials. Similarly, ASEAN integration has amplified regional demand for energy and agricultural products from non-member states such as Australia and India.

Another perspective on regional integration is offered by the literature of economic geography, which shows that the effects described by the traditional theory of customs unions are not uniformly distributed within the territory of the member

countries (Venables, 2005). The increase in market size and the competitive selection process activated by trade liberalisation tend to influence the territorial distribution of economic activities through complex centripetal and centrifugal forces. If the former prevails, regional integration tends to increase the geographical concentration of economic activities and widen the territorial inequalities within the customs union.

From Customs Unions to Single Markets and Beyond

As noted above, traditional customs union theory has been framed within a static model of perfect competition, which refers to the trade-creation and trade-diversion effects of discriminatory removals of tariffs on imported goods. In principle, this approach could be adapted to the services sector by calculating the tariff equivalent of the multiple regulatory barriers that limit trade in services. In this way, customs union theory could be adapted to the *economic integration arrangements* governed by Article 5 of the WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). However, this is not easy to do, and the type of *deep* integration that is implicit in the market access and national treatment commitments of the GATS is more complex than the simple removal of tariffs (Hoekman & Mattoo, 2013).

An important point to note is that, unlike trade in goods, which is based on the cross-border shipment of goods between economic agents (sellers and buyers) operating in different countries, trade in services often requires the seller and buyer to be in the same place at the same time. This is why the GATS refers to four different *modes of supply* for trade in services, namely cross-border supply, which is similar to trade in goods in that it allows producers and buyers to remain where they are, consumption abroad, which is based on the movement of buyers to the countries of the producers, commercial presence and presence of natural persons, both of which are based on the movement of producers to the countries of the buyers.

Consequently, the free movement of services within a regional integration area can only be achieved by also allowing the free movement of people and businesses, which marks the difference between a customs union, which only allows the free movement of goods, and a *single market*, such as the European Union, where service providers and buyers are free to move across national borders (Nita, 2017).

In the current context of growing geopolitical tensions, the dynamic benefits generated by deep regional integration processes could prove particularly important in addressing the difficult challenges that the international community is facing. In Europe, this explains why it is so important to solve the problems that still limit the effective degree of integration of the Single Market and to add to the *four freedoms* provided for by the Treaty of Rome a *fifth freedom* concerning the circulation of knowledge and innovation (Letta, 2024).

However, the basic fundamental intuition underlying Viner's theory of customs unions, namely the idea that preferential trade integration can increase economic welfare only if certain conditions are met, can also be adapted to deeper forms of

regional integration, including currency areas such as the Eurozone and the three monetary unions operating in Africa.¹ In principle, to the extent that the adoption of a single currency can be seen as removing a barrier to intra-regional transactions (Chen & Novy, 2018), the resulting trade-creating effects should be weighed against the possible distortions generated by trade diversion.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Despite its limitations, traditional customs union theory has always been at the centre of the long-standing debate on regionalism and multilateralism as alternative or complementary strategies for trade liberalisation and development. Simply put, Viner's model and its subsequent extensions show that regional integration is not necessarily welfare-enhancing and that, even when this is the case, non-discriminatory trade liberalisation in the context of the WTO system may be a better alternative. However, in cases where the economic costs of preferential integration are greater than their benefits, there is still the possibility that the political arguments in favour of regional integration are considered more important than the simple economic evaluation of its effects (World Bank, 2000). In this framework, the analytical tools of customs union theory can be considered a useful way to estimate the net cost of a legitimate political choice.

A related issue concerns the possible role of *plurilateral* agreements, i.e. agreements between a limited number of WTO members, which can be reached more easily than a full multilateral treaty, but are framed in a way that allows for their subsequent extension to any interested party. Such agreements may be particularly useful for experimenting with deep forms of international integration, paving the way for their possible extension to the WTO level (Akman et al., 2022). Their fundamental difference from traditional forms of regional integration lies in their openness, i.e. that the admission of new members does not require the same kind of accession negotiations that are necessary for the enlargement of regional integration areas. However, regional contexts may be more favourable environments for experimenting with these forms of non-preferential deeper integration, as illustrated by the example of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

More generally, regional integration remains the most viable and effective strategy to overcome the growing limitations and risks of national policies in producing the *global public goods* (Kaul et al., 1999) that are needed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations Agenda 2030. None of these goals can be achieved without the active participation of the interested communities, which requires a well-functioning multilevel allocation of political competences across supranational, national, and local institutions. Yet, whenever the scope of the problems to be solved goes beyond national borders, regional integration can be

¹ Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), Common Monetary Area (CMA) in Southern Africa, and West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU).

preferred to more ambitious global agreements, in order to achieve a better compromise between the different needs of each country and the search for an effective supranational solution.

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Essay 23: International Organisations, Competition, and Market Saturation: The *Market* of European Finance Institutions



Konstantinos D. Magliveras

Introduction

Even though for centuries, international organisations (IOs) have been the preferred vehicle for organising the international community (Magliveras, 2020), the number of regional IOs has constantly been rising, and their significance in transnational dealings has been increasing. But the question of their competition has not been discussed at length. Arguably, this has deprived the epistemic community of regional IOs of significant elements in determining and analysing the behaviour, qualities and characteristics of regional institutions and those participating in them, as well as the dynamics that are created. This essay attempts to lay down the fundamentals for an advanced discussion of competition among regional IOs, accepting that competition simply emerges when several IOs operate in the same domain (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020). By examining competition from a legal and not from an international relations perspective (Downie, 2022) and by using terms and norms from European Union (EU) competition law (e.g. products/services, geographic market, relevant market, undertakings, customers, demand, supply, market entry/exit, dominant position, monopoly), the essay argues that those IOs operating within a given area/region and exhibiting common features and traits constitute a *market*, effectively a competitive environment of functionally overlapping institutions (Gehring & Faude, 2014).

Within this *market* of IOs, competition develops and relates to supplying the same or similar products/services, attracting new customers and maintaining existing ones, barring the entry of new competitors, etc. Thus, IOs are treated here as *undertakings* and their member states as *customers* (Magliveras, 2015). Moreover, the question is posed of whether such a *market* of IOs could reach the point of saturation, as the new regional IOs usually engage in the same fields of activities as the existing IOs. Here,

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saturation, a concept closely related to the competition of undertakings operating in the same market, will be examined as understood in the economic theory. To apply the essay's theoretical construction in practice, the international financial institutions (IFIs)—or multilateral development organisations (MDOs)—active in the European region will be regarded as the *undertakings*. They form a *geographic market*, and, because of their activities, a *relevant market* exists that supplies financial *products/services* to their *customers*.

As a form of social interaction, *competition* could reasonably have a sociological definition and dimension as well. Sociologists like Georg Simmel and Max Weber, while attempting to justify sociology's independence as a distinct discipline, "abstracted competition from its nineteenth-century contexts in political economy" (Russ & Stafford, 2021, p. 14). Notwithstanding that their idea of competition would be quite different if seen from a regulatory/legal perspective, what their *competition* has in common with *competition* as a set of norms, rules, and procedures is that both are disassociated from conflict. Thus, while *competition* is about rivalry and contest between two or more objectively comparable entities, organisations, or bodies, it is a peaceful one. If it were to evolve into a *violent* state of affairs, it would no longer be competition and become a conflict. Then, the society within which they operate (whether this is the society as understood by sociologists or the global society of nations or a society of likely minded states) should take the necessary measures to appease it and possibly apply sanctions to *punish* the recalcitrant.

Adapting the EU Competition Law's Terms and Norms to a *Market* of IOs

According to the EU Court of Justice (CJEU), the term *undertaking* covers any entity carrying out an economic activity, regardless of its legal status and how it is financed. Therefore, the entity's public or private nature is of no relevance, while any activity relating to offering products/services constitutes an economic activity. According to the CJEU, even religious organisations could be considered, under conditions, as *undertakings*. Therefore, it could be argued that a *market* of IOs does exist.

The term *market* has two connotations: a geographic market and a products/services market. The former denotes a specific geographical region where a number of regional IOs operate in the same or related areas of activities, having the same or similar aims and principles. The size of this *geographic market* is immaterial as long as there exists a sufficient number of IOs to ensure its survival. The latter denotes the existence of the same or interchangeable products/services that are supplied to *customers* by those *undertakings* operating in the *market*.

For present purposes, the term *undertaking* means all regional IOs operating in the *market* and supplying member states with the same or interchangeable *products/services*. Therefore, all such IOs inside a given *market* are in a state of competition. The term *potential undertaking* denotes either (a) existing regional IOs that meet the

conditions to join and function inside a second or a third geographic *market* or (b) regional IOs not yet established but which, when created, are expected to enter into an IOs *market* and compete with the existing undertakings. The notion of market saturation is closely connected to such *potential undertakings*.

Moreover, the term *product/service* refers to what the *undertakings* offer or supply to their *customer*-member states in a specific *market*. It is difficult to adapt this term to IOs because their *products/services* are sometimes intangible and not always perceptible. For example, in the *market* of regional collective security IOs, the basic *product/service* supplied to *customers* is the promise that they will be defended and assisted when required. Arguably, states decide to join the IOs participating in this particular *market* because they are assured to be protected/succoured if attacked by another state. Thus, the *products/services* to be supplied might be tangible (tanks, aircraft, ammunition, etc.) but also intangible (moral support, oral promises of support and solidarity, etc.).

Finally, the term *customers* refers to the states that are members of the IOs and make up a specific *market*. Often, more than one state is a member of more than one of the IOs in question, i.e. several *undertakings* in the same *market* supply a *customer* with the same or interchangeable products/services. This essay is based on this premise, and it also acknowledges that the literature on so-called *overlapping regionalism* does not necessarily perceive more competition as something positive. *Potential customers* are those states geographically located in the relevant *market*, which might become members of one or more of the IOs in competition. States do not have the right to join IOs but must first fulfil the admission requirements and follow the prescribed procedure to be accepted, which is also true of undertakings: they can refuse to deal with potential customers if their terms and conditions are not met.

The Market of European IFIs, Access by Customers to It, and Competition Between the Undertakings Belonging to This Market

To apply this theoretical construction in practice, the model *market* of IFIs operating in Europe (broadly defined) will be employed. IFIs have been referred to as the *trusted partners of client governments* (Brookings Institution, 2017). It is a geographical market consisting of those regional IOs whose principal mission is to supply financing (loans, credits, etc.) to member states for their economic development (development finance). There are five *undertakings* in this *market*: the European Investment Bank (EIB); the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD); the Black Sea Trade and Development Bank; the Eurasian Development Bank/Eurasian Fund for Stabilisation and Development; and the Council of Europe (CoE) Development Bank. There is also considerable duplication of membership;

for example, all EIB members are also EBRD members, while most of them participate in the CoE Development Bank as well. The products/services supplied in this geographical *market* are principally providing financing to *customer*-member states. It is, therefore, a *relevant market* in which the supply of and the demand for financing interact.

The institutional architecture of IFIs includes the tripartite governance structure that was originally introduced by the Bretton Woods Institutions (International Monetary Fund [IMF] and World Bank) and is the one invariably used in joint-stock undertakings. Thus, there is (a) a Board of Governors, corresponding to a shareholders' meeting in joint-stock undertakings; (b) an Executive Council/Executive Board/Board of Executive Directors, corresponding to a board of directors; and (c) a President/Managing Director, corresponding to a chief executive officer (CEO).

Like joint-stock undertakings, IFIs set their own priorities and employ their own tools and devices. Thus, when *customer*-member states request financing, IFIs will apply their own rules and procedures to decide which to approve and under what conditions as several states participate in more than one European IFI, which, as argued, are in competition, a *customer* that is simultaneously a member of two (or more) IFIs may choose to be financed by the IFI applying the least strict conditions and offering the most favourable terms. The latter means, among others, lower borrowing rates, longer repayment and/or grace periods, no conditionality (IMF, 2021), no fiscal discipline imposed on *customers*, disassociation of financing from protecting human rights, or safeguarding the rule of law, or protecting the environment, etc. Thus, the *customer* could choose not to apply for financing to the IFI having the best reputation in the *market* (prestige and stature are of the utmost importance in competition) and/or the most advanced *products/services*, but to the one whose criteria and conditions it regards as the least strict.

Limiting the Access of *Customers* to the *Products/Services* Supplied by the Undertakings Competing in the Same *Market*

There are certain basic requirements to be met when a *customer*-member state requests assistance (*in casu*, financing) from an *undertaking*—IO, the most important being to have already fulfilled all its duties and obligations. Otherwise, the *customer* is not entitled to any support, and, additionally, the *undertaking* could impose sanctions. Specifically, IFIs' sanctions against recalcitrant *customers* may involve suspending or limiting the right of *customers* to receive loans, or requesting that outstanding loans be repaid immediately. In such an event, the *customer* is not without solutions because they might be able to seek financing from another IFI of the same geographic *market*. Thus, the existence of several IFIs in the same *market*, which are in competition with each other, could allow even recalcitrant *customers* to obtain alternative financing. Had there been only one IFI in the *market* in question,

it would have been a *monopoly*. Therefore, the recalcitrant *customer* would have found itself blocked, the only option left with being to get financing from another geographic *market*, provided that it could become a *customer* in that other *market*. This would present obstacles: as an outsider, it would have to show that it is a *desirable candidate* able to contribute and not a net recipient of *products/services* (Mattli, 1999, p. 14).

In conclusion, the more IOs participate in a *market*, the greater the competition will be and the greater access *customers* will have to the *products/services* as and when they need them. This competition will allow them to negotiate the most attractive terms with the *undertaking*—IFI, access the *market* even if blocked/barred by an *undertaking*, look for new/additional financing with more favourable conditions, etc. On the other hand, markets constantly change, and this has implications for the undertakings themselves. To put it into context, if a certain IFI insists on imposing extremely strict terms for financing *customer*-member states, while others offer far more attractive terms, its *products/services* might no longer be considered competitive, and *customers* will abandon it, i.e. member states will withdraw from that IFI.

Market Saturation: The Concept and Its Content

According to economic theory, the concept of saturation in a market is examined from a microeconomic and macroeconomic perspective. According to the former, saturation occurs when the market no longer generates new demand for the product/service that a particular undertaking sells/supplies. According to the latter, saturation occurs when, in a given market, the entire customer base's needs (i.e. the total number of existing customers) have already been served up. It follows that the undertakings of that market have no other opportunities to acquire new customers since all their needs have been met.

Market saturation exists when there is no more demand for a product/service or when an entire market cannot generate new demand from existing customers. Any future demand will be created from potential (new) customers. However, whether this will happen and whether, in the future, the new customers will sustain the required level of demand is not known. As long as they do not appear, the market will be in a state of saturation, and the undertakings that will not withstand the competition might become extinct, a development having direct bearings on competition since the market could become a duopoly or even a monopoly.

It is important to understand the conditions leading a market to the stage of being saturated: (a) there is no longer demand for the products/services offered, and/or (b) there are far more undertakings operating in the same market than those that can be justified on the basis of existing customers and their demand. To explain further, the first condition is that the products/services supplied might be outdated and not meet customers' needs, or of poor quality, forcing customers to turn to others which are offered in a different market. Consequently, the previously existing demand (or

at least a part of it) will be transferred to another market. Regarding the second condition, despite the existence of competition, the compound offering of the same products/services by the same undertakings has led to the saturation of the customer base, and, as a result, it is now impossible to create any new demand. In this scenario, it will be extremely difficult for new undertakings to emerge and operate unless they offer innovative and competitive products/services that would motivate customers to obtain them, thus creating new demand.

According to economic theory, a market that has reached saturation is not necessarily a negative development since it could trigger the undertakings affected to improve quality, reduce prices, offer customers better terms and conditions, etc. Nevertheless, if saturation continues for a long time and demand does not recover, the undertakings could sustain such losses that they will be forced to withdraw from the geographical market where they operate and to look to other markets for business if, of course, they exist. If this were to happen, and given the turmoil in the market, the weaker undertakings would likely disappear, a sign that in that particular market, there was one too many undertakings.

How customers will react to these developments will vary: (a) their behaviour changes, creating new and sustainable demand (especially if prices fall and quality improves); (b) having met all their needs, they feel content, leaving no room for new demand, and (c) they turn their interest to other relevant markets that they consider more attractive. The first reaction should have positive results: With saturation ended, new undertakings (these are the *potential undertakings*) will enter the market, and there will be competition again. In the second and third cases, the existing negative market situation will further deteriorate, and should radical solutions not be found, the market could even dissolve.

Saturation in the European IFIs *Market*

Applying the above considerations to the European IFI *market*, with constant economic growth in member states and an improved fiscal situation, the governments of *customers* will be able to use their own resources to finance development and implement infrastructure projects, projecting domestically a sense of proud national sovereignty (Mattli, 1999, p. 13). Therefore, as there will be no need to be supplied with new *products/services*, demand will be limited (i.e. no supply of fresh loans and/or no refinancing of existing ones). Moreover, *customers* might proceed with the earlier repayment of loans, not only to avoid paying interest but also as a symbol of national pride. Should demand for additional financing continue to fall, at some stage, the supply will exceed demand. In terms of a market economy, this could intensify competition among the *undertakings*, potentially leading to improved lending terms and conditions for *customers*.

Should the European IFI *market* reach the point of saturation, i.e. all supply has been exhausted and there is no demand for new financing, the *undertakings* concerned could face stagnation and a significant drop in their turnover that will impact their

profitability. To overcome these problems, IFIs could make their *products/services* available to other relevant geographic *markets*, hoping that it will lead to fresh and plentiful demand. Of course, they will immediately find themselves in competition with the *undertakings* already active in the other geographic *markets*. This scenario, while interesting, will not be discussed here. Suffice to mention that, in such an eventuality, European IFIs would compete, *inter alia*, in the Asian (geographic) *market* with the Asian Development Bank; in the African *market* with the African Development Bank and the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa; in the American *market* with the Inter-American Development Bank; in the Islamic *market* with the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), in the Arab *market* with the IDB and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, and so on.

However, the opposite can also happen: the economic/fiscal situation in the member states of European IFIs could deteriorate, and public finances could take a turn for the worse, creating a substantial new demand for financing to be supplied by the *undertakings*. How large the new demand will be will depend on several conditions, including the degree of access that *customers* have to other IFIs outside the European *market* (resorting to the IMF is an example), the ability to draw financing on a bilateral level, etc. Similarly, a state might find itself unable to secure the required monetary resources from the global financial markets because there is no interest in buying its government bonds, or lenders would lend it at interest rates which are unsustainable. In these circumstances, the government of a distressed *customer* would be prepared to accept whatever conditions the *undertakings* attach to provide financing, not least because the survival of the regime in power would be at stake.

For purposes of illustration, reference will be made to the destruction of housing, infrastructure, public utilities, etc., in Ukraine due to the armed conflict with the Russian Federation and the ensuing question of financing its reconstruction. The costs required for recovery and rebuilding will exceed USD 486 billion over the next decade (Multi-agency Donor Coordination Platform for Ukraine, 2024). At the Ukrainian Recovery Conference (Berlin, June 2024), the European Commission announced that it would launch a dedicated call to IFIs to mobilise support for investments in Ukraine, while EU guarantees will be used “as a primary de-risking tool, along with grants, blended financing to reduce borrowing costs [to] promote larger-scale private investments in Ukraine” (Co-Chairs’ Statement, 2024).

Arguably, Ukraine’s reconstruction will lead to considerable demand for the *products/services* supplied by the *undertakings* in the European IFI *market*. If this *market* had become saturated, the new demand generated by a single *customer* (Ukraine) could have restored its normal operation, with European IFIs competing with each other to finance Ukraine’s reconstruction. However, the European Commission’s announcement shows that there might be cooperation instead of competition. This would be in line with the sociological perspective of *competition*, which, among others, views competing entities acting cooperatively, namely not working against others but working with others (Redburn et al., 2009, p. 74).

A final question to be considered in the case of *potential undertakings* is the entry of new IFIs in the European *market*. In principle, this should be ruled out if the *market* is already saturated due to no new demand generated from *customers*, unless potential

undertakings are prepared to offer their products/services on such attractive terms that will secure them a market share without violating the rules of competition. On the other hand, if there is no saturation, the very large depth of the European *market* and a considerable number of *potential customers* might be grounds for attracting *potential undertakings*. However, the size and financial strength of the *undertakings* already in the *market* will be a negative factor, even a deterrent for *potential undertakings* to enter it. Suffice it to mention that the EIB—the EU’s investment bank owned by the 27 Member States—is the world’s largest multilateral lender: On 31 December 2023, it had disbursed 445.4 billion euros in loans and had a profit of 2.274 billion euros (EIB, 2024). In terms of competition, the EIB’s penetration of the *market* is of such magnitude that it could make it unattractive to new IFIs to supply their *products/services* to *customers*.

Conclusion

This essay examined how concepts and rules of competition law can be applied to regional IOs and, specifically, to the European IFIs. The latter were considered as *undertakings* that constitute a specific *geographic* and *relevant market* with their *products/services* supplied to their *customer*-member states. In particular, how this *market* operates, how demand and supply for the *products/services* shape the market and determine competition, how the exclusion of a *customer* can be countered by resorting to the *products/services* of another undertaking, and how *market* saturation, as well as the entry of new undertakings, might condition the *market*, all these questions have all been addressed in the essay.

Presently, the debate on competition between regional IOs is at a theoretical level, even though there is evidence that new IOs would advance and strengthen their position *vis-à-vis* existing IOs. From the field of IFIs, it is worth mentioning the New Development Bank (NDB) and the competition to which its activities might lead to. The Agreement establishing NDB was signed in July 2014 by the five BRICS countries. Its purpose is to mobilise financial resources for infrastructure and development projects both within the BRICS area and in states with developing/emerging economies. Consequently, NDB aims to complement global and regional IFIs, which, sooner or later, could bring it into competition with them (Porto & Donnellon-May, 2023). States join the NDB (membership is open to all UN members) either as borrowing or as non-borrowing members. So far, three states have acceded (Bangladesh, United Arab Emirates and Egypt), and there is a prospective member (Uruguay) (Chin, 2024). If European countries became non-borrowing members, the NDB would enter the European *market* of IFIs and would be in competition with the aforementioned IOs—*undertakings*. Finally, given that four NDB member states belong to the African, Arab and/or Islamic regions, there should be possibilities for competition between the NDB and the existing IFIs in the respective *geographic markets*.

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Essay 24: The Theory of Optimum Currency Areas: A Universal Compass for Regional Monetary Integration?



Ad van Riet

Introduction

The basic insight from the theory of optimum currency areas (OCA) is that countries participating in regional monetary integration face a trade-off between the shared benefits of adopting a common currency with a single monetary policy and the individual costs of giving up the exchange rate as a national instrument supporting macroeconomic adjustment. The member states should ideally form a closely integrated economic region with a similar business cycle, a diversified industrial structure, and a central budget to assist economies that move out of sync. A high degree of symmetry in economic shocks, adequate flexibility of production factors and countercyclical budgetary transfers from the centre increase the likelihood that all member states will be able to reap the fruits of being part of a monetary union. Although the OCA theory does not provide a coherent identification of the economic and political criteria that candidate countries should meet, it nevertheless gained the status of mainstream theory. Over time, two challenges undermined its role as a universal compass for regional monetary integration: the crisis in the eurozone and the changing global order.

Mundell's Optimum Currency Area Theory

At the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference of July 1944 in Bretton Woods (in the US state of New Hampshire), 44 allied nations agreed to peg their currencies to the US dollar at a fixed but adjustable exchange rate, whereby the US dollar, in turn, was convertible into gold at a fixed price. Many economic writers

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criticised the fact that, in practice, these countries followed a fixed exchange rate standard without making use of the available room for adjustment; they urged them instead to adopt flexible exchange rates that would leave national monetary policies free to respond to shocks hitting the economy. At the same time, the steps taken in Europe towards economic and political unification made these academics think about the effectiveness of macroeconomic adjustment within a monetary union with permanently fixed internal exchange rates. Some of their contributions during this period anticipated the basic tenets of optimum currency area analysis.

Formalising these building blocks, Mundell (1961) presented a theoretical framework for determining the optimum geographical domain for a common or single currency area. Optimality is defined as a currency domain which is small enough for its members to realise the twin macroeconomic objectives of internal balance (low inflation and full employment) and external balance (balance of payments equilibrium), and which is still large enough for them to enjoy the microeconomic advantages of using common money. Mundell's seminal note on the theory of optimum currency areas highlighted three key elements:

First, he made the conceptual point that the geographical domain of an optimum currency area is formed by the region instead of the state. Given its homogeneous structure, the region is the relevant economic unit for making the choice between fixed or flexible exchange rates, disconnected from the state and its national institutions. This new perspective laid the foundations for an economic theory of regional integration (Gavin & De Lombaerde, 2005). Yet, the world's monies are issued by a state, not a region. National currencies stand for national sovereignty and national identity. Mundell, therefore, believed that, in practice, the borderlines of a currency area could be optimally redrawn only in those territories where the political organisation is in a state of flux. As a case in point, he mentioned Western Europe, which was moving ahead with regional economic integration and envisioned a common market as a step toward a common currency and an eventual political union. As another example, he referred to the choice of the exchange-rate regime in ex-colonial territories.¹ The question of the optimum currency domains for these regions boiled down to the empirical question of whether or not they could be considered a single economic area separate from the existence of a central political authority.

Second, Mundell (1961) specified the macroeconomic characteristics that a nation must have to make it feasible to surrender its monetary policy. Above all, countries wishing to participate in regional monetary integration should be able to adjust to asymmetric disturbances and restore macroeconomic equilibrium through means other than changing the exchange rate of their national currencies. Assuming that wages and prices are sticky, a high degree of mobility of production factors across the region (but not outside the region) is an essential ingredient for the optimal functioning of a common currency or a single currency area. The free movement of

¹ For example, after World War II, the Commonwealth of Nations (mostly former territories of the British Empire) stayed with the sterling area. Around 1960, the former colonies of France in Central Africa and West Africa gained political independence, and most opted to stay in the franc zone.

capital and labour within a common market is needed to support balance-of-payments adjustment when a member state has lost its competitiveness.

At the time of writing in 1961, international capital flows were still severely restricted. For a single currency area comprising several countries, his view implied that cross-border labour movements would have to restore internal macroeconomic stability. Since labour mobility tended to be modest, this criterion worked in favour of limiting a common currency to a smaller and, thus, more homogeneous geographical domain. Later on, as capital restrictions between countries were being removed, Mundell (1973a) pointed out that the capacity of cross-border financial asset holdings to spread country risks and absorb asymmetric shocks supported a common currency spanning a wider area that could also be more heterogeneous.

Third, Mundell (1961) stressed the microeconomic advantages of a common currency that circulates over a larger geographical domain since it supports a higher efficiency of the functions of money. The elimination of internal exchange rates in a single currency area reduces the information costs of comparing foreign prices and costs (unit of account function), saves on currency conversion costs in cross-border transactions (medium of exchange function) and—an argument added by McKinnon (1963)—it supports the stability of money (store of value function). A region must have a sufficient size for its money to have these three conveniences. A world with a high number of small regions with separate currencies that all fluctuate against each other faces high efficiency costs of product valuation, currency exchange, and monetary uncertainty. Thin foreign exchange markets would also make the corresponding currencies vulnerable to speculative attacks.

Acknowledging the microeconomic efficiency of enlarging the domain of a common currency, other academics soon introduced additional macroeconomic criteria for assessing the costs and benefits of participating in a multilateral currency union. They added key elements like the openness of the economy which constrains the national ability to maintain price stability (McKinnon, 1963), the diversification of the production structure which helps to reduce the impact of asymmetric shocks (Kenen, 1969), the role of international portfolio diversification as private risk insurance (Mundell, 1973a), and the importance of centralised institutions to enable budgetary transfers and reserve pooling as public risk sharing devices (Kenen, 1969; Mundell, 1973a).

Some attention was also given to the welfare function that would allow prospective members to weigh the costs and benefits of entering a monetary union. However, the OCA theory offered no solution for single currency areas combining very small and very large countries or members with vastly different levels of economic prosperity, and it paid no attention to the cross-country distribution of the net benefits of a common currency. As some of the proposed criteria to assess optimality were also based on tentative assumptions, mutually inconsistent or analytically inconclusive, the framework as such never developed into a coherent theory with practical applicability. As a result, academic interest faded away.

Economic writers began to think more positively of the OCA theory in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the consensus shifted towards the belief that monetary policy should be given a credible mandate to maintain medium-term price

stability rather than being asked to fine-tune output growth over the business cycle. High-inflation countries willing to surrender their national monetary autonomy to the independent monetary authority of a single currency area would be able to gain such monetary credibility without losing much of their countercyclical adjustment capacity. Moreover, new academic studies emphasised the endogeneity of an optimum currency area, suggesting that the members of a non-optimal monetary space could converge towards optimality once it was in operation (Frankel & Rose, 1998). This idea made an exogenously given low labour mobility a less decisive negative factor for countries wishing to take part in regional monetary integration.

The Eurozone and Beyond

As the Bretton-Woods exchange rate system started to crumble in the late 1960s and finally broke down in the early 1970s, the turn to flexible exchange rates revived the interest among policymakers in Europe and elsewhere in regional currency stabilisation and monetary integration. Mundell (1973b) proposed the creation of a pan-European currency as an economic and political counterpart to the US dollar. Without offering a formal analysis, he argued that Europe possessed enough of the characteristics of an optimum currency area to move towards narrower, rather than wider, fluctuations in exchange rates.

The basic insights of the OCA theory served as a starting point for empirical studies assessing the costs and benefits for the member states of the European Union (EU) of adopting a common currency. Against this background, European policymakers agreed on the importance of sustainable economic convergence for successful participation in the planned Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). The euro became operational in 1999 with an initial group of 11 members. Against the advice of many academic observers, membership also followed political considerations rather than full compliance with the economic convergence criteria. As another point of their concern, extending the EMU with a political union was relegated to the future.

During the first decade of its existence, the euro appeared to be a great success (van Riet, 2024). While the European Central Bank broadly managed to preserve price stability at the eurozone level, the participating EU countries saw a convergence of their output per capita levels. Central and Eastern European countries, which meanwhile joined the EU common market, gained the realistic prospect of adopting the euro once they met the economic convergence criteria. As a result, the eurozone steadily expanded to comprise a current total of 20 nations. As a freely floating, relatively stable common currency for a large geographical domain, the euro also became the second most important reserve currency and anchor currency in the world after the US dollar.

The success of monetary unification in Europe attracted the attention of other regional associations. The EU served as their role model, both for economic and political reasons. First, it highlighted the advantages of completing a common market with a common currency. The expectation was that the enhanced price transparency and

reduced transaction costs of using the same money would promote internal competition and give a substantial push to regional trade, while a monetary union of low-cost inflation and high productivity growth would strengthen external competitiveness in global markets. Second, the EMU's governance framework suggested that members of a single currency area could surrender their monetary sovereignty to a common central bank while preserving national responsibility for economic policies, albeit under multilateral surveillance. This asymmetric approach separated the details of monetary policymaking, which were perceived as a technical matter, from political decisions on government budgets, which were best left in national hands.

Following Europe, several regional associations have played with the idea of complementing their free trade agreements or common markets with a new common currency or actively working on deeper economic integration to underpin their existing common currency. The feasibility of regional monetary integration was discussed, for example, in Central America, Latin America and North America. The members of the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and the Gulf Cooperation Council adopted concrete plans to start a monetary union. The Central African and West African country blocs, which already operated a currency union with a customs union, created the Central African Economic and Monetary Community and the West African Economic and Monetary Union. Similarly, the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, which already had a common currency in place, extended its currency union with an economic union (van Riet, 2024). Just as in Europe, officials of the respective regions set economic convergence criteria for the member states to secure a homogeneous common market and a sustainable single currency. This Eurocentric approach suggested that the EU's governance model could be copied with little change to other regional associations despite notable differences in history, culture and preferences. Most academics who applied the OCA criteria to regions outside Europe were much more cautious in their conclusions about the optimality of a common currency and stressed the large differences in economic structure and political governance between the partner states.

Implications of the Eurozone Crisis and the Changing Global Order

Cracks in the EMU's edifice showed up after the great financial crisis of 2008 and the sovereign debt crisis of 2010, which revealed that several member countries had accumulated unsustainable macroeconomic imbalances (van Riet, 2024). On the one hand, the evolving euro area crisis was seen as revenge for the OCA theory, as the crisis-hit nations had failed to maintain their economic flexibility and financial soundness as a precondition for their ability to absorb asymmetric shocks. On the other hand, the euro area crisis highlighted that the OCA theory was silent about the necessity of a banking union to accompany monetary integration and a lender of last resort to counter the spreading of asymmetric shocks in a fiscal-financial crisis.

Overall, EMU required more effective economic surveillance, banking supervision, deeper fiscal integration, and common rescue funds to secure economic and financial stability. While the cracks in EMU were partly repaired, the euro's reputation was dented, and Europe lost its position as a role model for other regions interested in combining economic and monetary integration.

Meanwhile, the changing global order (Hosli & Selleslaghs, 2020) is giving new momentum to the efforts of non-Western nations to disconnect from the global dominance of the US dollar or to replace the euro as their anchor currency. One economic reason is the growing weight of China and the Global South in international trade and investment. Another relevant issue is the drive toward strategic autonomy and national sovereignty, as well as monetary matters. A further argument is that the US and, later, the EU have started to use their global currency power as a diplomatic weapon to impose financial sanctions on unfriendly countries. Taken together, these three geopolitical factors motivate many non-Western states to diversify their foreign reserves away from the US dollar and the euro, to strive for monetary sovereignty and/or to align their currencies with those of new trade partners.

A notable initiative in this regard was taken by the group of five BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Without regard to the OCA criteria, some of their politicians suggested establishing a common currency backed by gold to reduce the bloc's reliance on the US dollar. The idea of monetary integration among geographically distant and economically diverse nations appears questionable because an optimum currency area typically requires the geographical proximity of its members to function as a single economic area successfully. Empirical analysis of the BRICS nations also shows the presence of notable economic disparities in the transmission and absorption of shocks (Nach & Ncwadi, 2024). Moreover, none of the member states are ready to give up their monetary sovereignty to a common central bank, especially as the largest country among them (China) aims to turn its own money into a leading global currency.

Accordingly, the BRICS countries are instead considering more limited forms of monetary cooperation that preserve their national currencies as a symbol of their national identities. One pragmatic avenue is the introduction of a common cross-border payment system for settling their bilateral trade and investment transactions. Each of the participating national currencies would be accepted as a means of payment, replacing, in many cases, the US dollar. For this purpose, national payment systems could be linked to a basket of national currencies that is constructed with an agreed set of conversion rates and serves as a common unit of account. As a first step, this basket could consist of a pool of national central bank digital currencies.

The BRICS alliance was extended in 2024 with new members (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates). Many other countries in the Global South have expressed their interest in joining this country bloc in the future and, hence, linking up with its prospective cross-border payment platform. Following similar motivations, other regional associations in Africa, Asia, Eurasia, and Latin America are also in the process of integrating their national payment systems or are already operating a multilateral payment infrastructure, accepting settlements in partner currencies instead of the US dollar or the euro.

Conclusion

Looking back, the OCA theory has faced ups and downs in its function as a universal compass for members of regional associations wishing to assess the optimality of introducing a common currency without a common state. The OCA theory reached mainstream status in the run-up to the EMU in Europe and served as a euro-centric guidepost for other regions in the world, as there was no alternative analytical framework to assess the costs and benefits of their monetary integration. The OCA criteria are still valid as a starting point for such an evaluation, in particular for groups of neighbouring countries with an advanced level of economic integration. However, the euro area crisis indicated that these regions need to apply a more comprehensive framework of multiple dimensions to make a proper assessment. The complexities surrounding the introduction of a common currency further make it necessary to always take the local characteristics of a particular region and its member states into account.

The changing global order towards a multipolar currency system is set to further challenge the prominence of the OCA theory. Geopolitical arguments appear to have taken centre stage in some proposals to form new currency domains. Acknowledging the fact that the OCA criteria are hard to meet, some political alliances are moving forward with a more pragmatic form of monetary cooperation that focuses on coupling their national payment systems with the aim of replacing the US dollar or the euro as settlement currencies in cross-border financial transactions. These multi-lateral payment infrastructures are consistent with the geopolitical demand for a variable geography of membership that respects the monetary sovereignty and national currency of each participant. Whereas the OCA theory argues that the optimum currency area is formed by an integrated economic region, the feasible currency domain in the real world is given by the strength of national monetary identities.

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Essay 25: One Size Doesn't Fit all: Why Eurocentric Assumptions Limit the Explanatory Power of Mainstream Regionalism Theories in the Global South



Ivo Ganchev

Introduction

The postwar global order has witnessed a significant rise in regional organisations. In 1955, each state was, on average, a member of 1.1 regional organisations; by 2015, this number had grown to 4.8 (Panke & Starkmann, 2021, p. 8) and has now surpassed five as of 2024. These mechanisms, supported by regional agreements, reflect a global trend of institutionalising and deepening inter-state cooperation to pursue shared political, economic, security, or other goals—a process which begins with cooperation and may develop into integration. Regional organisations generally promote this transition and seek to deepen integration further.

This essay uses *regionalism* to denote the multidisciplinary study of the inter-state integration process within political science. Clarifying this term is necessary, as the discussion here critiques Eurocentric biases in mainstream theories of regionalism. I argue that the prevailing pessimism about integration in the Global South arises from the Eurocentric foundations of theories, including functionalism, neofunctionalism, and transactionalism. These frameworks, deeply influenced by Europe's unique historical conditions, impose mismatched expectations on regions with distinct historical, political, and economic contexts. Meanwhile, new regionalism only provides partial insights into integration processes, while comparative regionalism poses practical challenges such as implicit bias and case selection, as these approaches also fall short of accurately accounting for the dynamics of the Global South. Hence, I advocate for the academic community to either pursue or enable young scholars to work towards a new, inclusive theory of regionalism for the Global South, recognising the shared historical conditions of states there and ultimately resetting expectations of regional integration processes.

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_25

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Regionalism in the Global North and Global South

Definitions of *region* and *regional organisation* vary among scholars. Regions may be united by geographic, economic, social, cultural, or political traits (Archer, 2015, p. 42), allowing diverse theoretical alignments. The United Nations (1945, Articles 52–53) implicitly recognises regional organisations as international organisations, but does not define specific criteria to distinguish them as a separate category officially. This essay focuses on formally defined regional organisations—entities based on agreements among at least three governments, supported by bureaucracies, and operating through diplomatic forums (Nye, 1971, p. 5). These organisations serve diverse roles, from cultural containers to multi-level governance actors or agents of transformation (Hurrell, 2007, p. 128; Hettne, 2005, p. 544).

The dynamics of regional organisations are shaped by their member states' types and standings, often classified by economic development. Based on metrics like GDP and living standards (Hoffmeister, 2020), the UN categorises Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia (excluding Israel, Japan, and Korea), and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) as *developing* regions (UNCTAD, 2024). Historically marginalised by global powers, these states often identify with the *Global South*, which evolved from the now-outdated *Third World*. While some scholars see these two terms as interchangeable (Sajed, 2020), others argue that the shift reflects a focus on resisting colonial legacies over anti-capitalism (Pinheiro, 2024). In any case, it is clear that states that view themselves as members and/or allies of this grouping believe that they were previously *losers* in terms of the distribution of resources and power in the international system and aspire to rise. Representing over three-quarters of the world by population and state count, the Global South significantly outnumbers the Global North. Even if one views major emerging powers like China and India (Chao, 2024; Tellis & Mirski, 2013) as solo players outside this group, the Global South remains a majority globally.

As a result, most regional organisations today are formed by members of the Global South. A database by the Centre for Regional Integration (forthcoming) identifies 16 active organisations in Africa and 14 in Latin America and the Caribbean, indicating significant activity within the past year. While other regions or sub-regions may not have as many active organisations, notable examples such as ASEAN in Southeast Asia still stand out. This body has successfully sustained peace among diverse states, fostered integration, and managed crises despite an annual budget of under USD 20 million—over 8000 times smaller than that of the EU (Mahbubani & Sng, 2017).

Not all active regional organisations in the Global South demonstrate such efficiency. Many face challenges such as a lack of a common vision, management issues, and severe budgetary constraints. Yet, their sustained operations through decades of negotiation and commitment by successive governments suggest they are purposeful rather than incidental. This perseverance reflects the efforts of diverse contributors, from regional visionaries to administrators. Scholars have coined terms such as *social*, *productive* (Briceño-Ruiz, 2018), *open*, *post-liberal* (Briceño-Ruiz & Rivarola

Puntigliano, 2021), and *developmental* (Adejumobi & Obi, 2020) regionalism to describe these efforts.

Nonetheless, strong criticisms persist. Qobo (2007, p. 1) notes that many scholars argue that Africa's integration efforts have failed to deliver satisfactory economic results, such as narrowing the GDP gap with developed regions. Latin American integration faces similar accusations of having "dysfunctional" institutions (Baquero-Herrera, 2005, p. 171), with claims that organisations often serve political goals like regime legitimacy and face structural obstacles, including "inter-presidentialism" (Malamud & Gardini, 2012, p. 131). ASEAN, too, has been criticised for issuing statements with "little substance" (The Economist, 2016) and was recently warned to change or "face irrelevance" due to its passive stance on issues like Myanmar's human rights violations and South China Sea tensions (Aung et al., 2024).

These criticisms are so widespread that they form an entire strand of literature, which raises two concerns. First, if accurate, they imply that numerous governments across the Global South have wasted decades and resources investing in regional organisations to no effect—an implausible assumption that underestimates political leadership in Africa, Latin America, and vast parts of Asia. To be clear, I am not arguing that all governments in these regions are operating well, and many records of administrations of developing states active in regional organisations are marred by inefficiencies, be it Zimbabwe, active in the Southern African Development Community (Dashwood, 2001), Venezuela, de facto leader of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (Ganchev, 2024, p. 27), or Pakistan, active in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Sardar, 2024). However, it would be extreme to suggest that many successive governments are all entirely self-serving and employ regional organisations only to increase their own legitimacy or remain blind to their own ineptitude.

Second, the prevalence of these criticisms suggests that they are not always grounded in sufficiently thorough research. My view is that social science scholars should first be able to explain the driving forces behind processes before proceeding to evaluate them. From this standpoint, understanding how and why integration occurs in the Global South should be a priority before delivering a strong assessment. Yet, no major theory or comprehensive explanatory framework serves this purpose, and criticisms abound. Why?

Labelling a process as a *failure* requires a preconception of *success*. Success is typically determined by comparing performance or outcomes with predefined goals or by observing a mismatch between reality and expectations, often derived from studying comparable cases. In the context of regionalism, these practices are closely tied to the European Union (EU), often considered "the most advanced regional grouping in the world" (Kühnhardt, 2010, p. 17). This has been perpetuated by both scholars and politicians who are inevitably also influenced by narratives: for instance, both the leaders and scholars of MERCOSUR have openly stated their aspirations to emulate the EU, which openly announced in 2002 its intentions to provide EUR 200 million worth of funding to the member states of the emerging Southern market within the next four years (see, e.g., Caichiolo, 2019). Most recently, following lengthy negotiations, the two blocs concluded a free trade agreement (European Commission,

2024). The actions of Brussels exemplify its commitment to assist groupings, which openly seek to emulate its integration model. This type of ambition is not uncommon in many regional organisations. However, it often eventually damages their reputation as they set expectations too high, making progress seem slow, work ineffective, and structures relatively underdeveloped compared to initial expectations.

Eurocentric Ideas on Regionalism

Several factors perpetuate Eurocentric ideas in regionalism; some are organic and relate to the genuine conviction of some scholars who are committed proponents of the EU model, but others emerge as a deliberate outcome of European policies. Beyond hosting delegations to share its experience (Cameron, 2010, p. 2), Brussels actively promotes its integration framework as a model. European institutions fund and distribute research that champions European integration, such as the Kolleg-Forschergruppe (KFG) Working Paper Series (Börzel & Risse, 2009) as well as publications from the European Policy Centre (e.g., Berkofsky, 2005; Buti & Messori, 2024) and the Jean Monnet Centre (e.g., Dehousse, 2000; Zielonka, 2000). Politically, this boosts the EU's legitimacy and helps it to defend itself against various criticisms, primarily from internal Eurosceptic arguments. On the one hand, the outcomes of this process generate some positive externalities for academics who are able to obtain funding for valuable studies in a niche field. On the other hand, it also generates a pervasive effect of entrenching Eurocentric narratives as a dominant strand of the literature, although they may not universally apply elsewhere, given the varying histories, geographies, and cultures of other regions. As the following analysis will reveal, effective regionalism requires accounting for these differences when conceptualising integration processes or applying models.

However, an even stronger academic force perpetuating Eurocentrism lies in mainstream theories outlining expected integration patterns. These theories were largely developed by European scholars, many of whom fled Nazi persecution in the 1930s and 1940s. Their work was driven by the desire to ensure security and prevent future wars in Europe (Griffiths et al., 2009, pp. 67, 92).

The first mainstream theories applied federalism at the regional level. Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi (1988), Italian journalists imprisoned during WWII, advocated regional integration for peace in their *Ventotene Manifesto*. Post-war, Oxford academic Kenneth Wheare (1963) developed *liberal federalism*, while William Riker (1964) proposed *realist federalism*, suggesting states join federations for defence or economic benefits. Similarly, Amitai Etzioni (2001), whose family fled the Nazis, pioneered the political unification paradigm, emphasising economic and military cooperation contingent on existing economic interdependence.

The assumptions of these regionalism theories do not apply to the Global South. While violence exists, large-scale inter-state wars are rare. Since 1945, Africa has experienced only four such wars with 1000+ fatalities, while the two largest inter-state wars in Latin America—the Falklands War and the Cenepa War—both resulted

in fewer casualties (Sarkees & Wayman, 2010). To be clear, there have been many other forms of conflicts both in these and other regions of the Global South, including various rebellions, skirmishes, and inter-state stand-offs, which are too many to mention. Although there is clear animosity between states in particular cases, such as between the DRC and Rwanda (Mathys, 2017) or India and Pakistan (Nicolson, 2022), it creates a dynamic that differs fundamentally from the structured wars which contributed to the institutionalisation and creation of modern states in Europe (Tilly, 1992)—the same states that eventually integrated their well-structured political systems into the European Union.

Furthermore, Global South militaries and police are under-resourced compared to those in the Global North, as evidenced by budgets and technology (SIPRI, 2024; Hoppenbrouwers, 2024; Fleming & Roché, 2024). As a result, not only does the motivation for pursuing inter-state wars between Global South states diminish, but their function also changes since they are often deployed to assist with resolving intra-state conflicts or fights with criminals or gangs (Danish Institute for International Studies, 2017). Despite exceptions, governments in the Global South generally display solidarity with fellow states, while ongoing and/or potential disputes typically focus on territorial claims rooted in historical arguments (e.g., Crimea, Kashmir, and the South China Sea) rather than imperialist ambitions in the traditional sense of waging increasingly expansive wars.

Moreover, economic gains from regionalism are limited without substantial intra-regional trade, which remains low in the Global South. Intra-regional trade accounts for 13% in Africa and about 20% in Latin America and ASEAN (African Union, 2024; Moreau & Parente, 2023; Li, 2024), compared to over 60% in the EU (Kiechel et al., 2022). This disparity keeps Global South regions dependent on external markets and hinders industrialisation. These regions primarily export raw materials and labour-intensive goods to the Global North, a pattern slow to change (Yadav, 2021). Thus, the conditions assumed by federalism and Etzioni's political unification paradigm—economic interdependence and shared concerns—are absent in most of the Global South.

The second strand of regionalism theories includes functionalism and neofunctionalism. Functionalism, developed by David Mitrany, a Romanian-born British scholar, emphasises diminished state sovereignty and the empowerment of technocrats in policymaking (Mitrany, 1966). Though not focused solely on Europe, Mitrany advocated for peace, as reflected in his works and communication with E.H. Carr on the role of integration in security (Anderson, 1998). Neofunctionalism, an evolution of functionalism, was developed by Ernst Haas, who, like Amitai Etzioni, fled antisemitism in Nazi Germany. Haas described integration as driven by external threats, public demand for prosperity, and political responses to these pressures (Haas, 1958; Ruggie et al., 2005).

However, neither functionalism nor neofunctionalism applies to the Global South. The assumptions of functionalism are overly idealistic, even for Europe. Later in life, Mitrany (1975, p. 71) himself criticised the growing politicisation of European regionalism. Leadership appointments in regional organisations are often politically motivated, particularly in developing regions. Examples include former Chadian

prime minister Moussa Faki Mahamat at the African Union, Nestor Kirchner at UNASUR, and a former Thai foreign minister at ASEAN. This politicisation diverges from Mitrany's vision of technocratic leadership.

Neofunctionalism similarly fails to reflect the realities of developing regions. Unlike Europe, where Russia's military threat has been a constant concern, Africa and Latin America face no equivalent. Although states in Southeast Asia may be wary of potential military threats from China or India, and tension surrounding Taiwan could theoretically affect the region's security dynamics (Bing, 2024), the likelihood of a large-scale regional invasion or broad region-wide war remains minimal, as inter-state relations in Southeast Asia have been relatively stable (Hutagalung, 2024). Additionally, centralised governance and weaker civil society institutions in developing regions make bottom-up integration processes improbable (Hyden et al., 2003). These limitations underline the same flaw shared by earlier theories: reliance on conditions unique to advanced democracies, which are absent in the Global South.

The third strand of mainstream theories of regionalism, namely transactionalism, was developed by Karl Deutsch (1954, 1957, 1968). His model envisions integration beginning with increased social communication and developing mutual predictability, responsiveness, and value compatibility among states, ultimately fostering a *we-feeling* and shared identity. While linguistic similarities in Spanish-speaking Latin America or ideologies like pan-Africanism might theoretically support this, practical realities hinder its applicability. Fragmented national identities and economic disparities limit the formation of common identities. Integration in the Global South is driven by intergovernmental organisations, not communities. These mechanisms rely on elite-driven processes, such as inter-presidential decision-making in Latin America or ministerial meetings in ASEAN (Sanahuja, 2007).

Although some may consider the theories discussed thus far outdated, their influence persists. Limited theoretical development in the 1980s and 1990s (Hurrell, 1995) has allowed mainstream ideas to establish a dominant standing in academic discourse. These theories, taught in universities across the world, shape the perspectives of future regionalist scholars, maintaining their relevance and centrality to regionalism—the very field that this essay critically examines.

In contrast to the earlier theories discussed above, more recently developed approaches are not explicitly rooted in Eurocentric assumptions; however, their frameworks also present distinct challenges that limit their applicability to the Global South. While *old* regionalism emphasised inter-governmental interactions, *new* regionalism incorporates non-state actors, such as private companies and civil society, in promoting integration (Mansfield & Milner, 1999; Breslin et al., 2002). However, civil society in the Global South lacks the resources to drive large-scale developments, leaving integration projects primarily state-led. Thus, while mapping non-state actions can provide valuable supplementary insights, it cannot yield a holistic theory of regionalism for these regions.

Another framework, comparative regionalism (Katzenstein, 1996), has recently gained traction, reaching a major milestone with the publication of the Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism (Börzel & Risse, 2016). While studies such

as Krapohl's (2017) economic integration framework, which examines ASEAN, MERCOSUR, and SADC, represent progress, they lack the scope and ambition of earlier seminal works. These efforts often yield partial insights rather than comprehensive theories and garner limited attention—Krapohl's framework, for instance, has been cited only 50 times in seven years. Similarly, Coe's (2019) analysis of ASEAN, OAS, and the African Union's impact on sovereignty, along with Muntschick and Plank's (forthcoming) volume on regionalism performance, offer valuable findings but fall short of proposing overarching theories.

These publications indicate ongoing changes and can serve as a good starting point. However, it is crucial to be cautious when employing the comparative method, as it can lead to unintended consequences. As De Lombaerde et al. (2010, p. 742) note, comparisons can cause "understanding [to] become distorted, irrespective of which perspective dominates or shapes the paradigm from which all other views are judged." However, these comparisons are constant and can be both explicit and implicit. Some of them are clearly intended and purposeful, as in the above-discussed cases of papers sponsored with EU funds, which openly uphold its model as superior. Other cases may result from unintended actions, as scholars might not always be fully aware of the full range and extent of biases that underpin their own assumptions. However, even so, the consequences are that such practices perpetuate the dominance of Eurocentric ideas in regionalism. Besides, even being fully aware of this issue and consciously trying to avoid it in one's research would not always be successful, as comparativists face intricate challenges related to methodological rigour in terms of case selection and accounting for the causes of inter-regional differences when measuring the same variable—an issue which is beyond the scope of this essay but deserves more careful consideration by researchers.

Conclusion: The Future of Regionalism Studies

While the comparative method remains a valuable tool, future progress will likely depend on a creative combination of methods and ideas. Regionalist scholars must prioritise developing a new theory of regionalism for the Global South, as the existing literature provides none. To advance this endeavour—or at least create space for its development—the academic community must engage in a collective effort. Instead of a traditional conclusion, I propose the following five steps:

Recognise the Uniqueness of the EU and Europe

The European Union and Europe as a region represent *sui generis* cases in regionalism, arising from unique historical, political, and economic conditions such as post-war reconstruction, shared security concerns, and high levels of economic interdependence. Expecting regions in the Global South to emulate EU-style integration

disregards their distinct contexts and may lead to unwarranted criticisms of their progress. Instead, scholars must focus on understanding and appreciating the diverse trajectories and mechanisms through which regional integration unfolds in different parts of the world.

Account for the Importance of Historical Conditions

The unique historical conditions of the Global South—including legacies of colonialism, struggles for independence, and ongoing efforts to assert sovereignty—profoundly shape their approach to regionalism. These histories influence governments' priorities, trust levels, and willingness to cede authority to regional organisations. Recognising this helps explain why integration often takes different forms, prioritising developmental and social goals over purely economic or security objectives. Historical awareness is essential for developing theories that resonate with the lived realities of these regions.

Prioritise Explanation before Critique

In studying regional integration in the Global South, scholars should first aim to explain how and why intergovernmental processes occur before offering critiques or future projections. This involves understanding the drivers behind integration efforts, such as shared developmental goals or responses to external pressures, as well as the obstacles they face, including resource constraints or political fragmentation. A solid explanatory foundation ensures that critiques are fair and grounded, avoiding Eurocentric biases that prematurely label ongoing initiatives as failures.

Encourage Independent Research in the Global South

Young scholars must be encouraged to explore regional integration in the Global South without being constrained by the need to apply mainstream theories developed in vastly different contexts. Allowing them to approach these regions on their own terms fosters creativity and leads to more accurate, context-sensitive analyses. This shift requires providing research support, such as funding and mentorship, and creating academic spaces where alternative perspectives are valued and recognised.

Embrace Pluralism in Regionalism

Finally, there is no universal blueprint for regional integration. Teaching and research practices should reflect the pluralistic nature of regionalism, acknowledging that different regions have diverse needs and can design their own models of cooperation. Abandoning hierarchies that privilege certain organisations or frameworks over others allows for a richer and more inclusive understanding of regional integration globally, highlighting the innovative and context-specific solutions developed in the Global South.

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Essay 26: Contextualising Mainstream Regionalism Theories: Lessons from the Global South



Abhishek Thommandru and Varda Mone

“Regional and subregional organisations can play an important role in the prevention of conflicts, restoration and consolidation of peace, and post–conflict peacebuilding. Their in–depth knowledge of local dynamics, ties with local actors and geographic proximity allow them to make vital contributions in these areas”– Resolution 2033, United Nations Security Council (2012)

Introduction and Eurocentric Critique

The dominance of Western–centric theories in the study of regionalism has long obscured the rich tapestry of regional dynamics in the Global South. This essay argues that mainstream regionalism theories, rooted in European experiences, fundamentally fail to capture the essence of regional cooperation and integration in diverse global contexts. By critically examining these theories through the lens of Global South experiences, we uncover not only their limitations but also reveal the imperative for a radical reconceptualisation of regionalism studies.

Mainstream theories of regionalism—neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, and new regionalism—have held an iron grip on academic discourse, shaping our understanding of regional integration processes. Neofunctionalism, with its emphasis on spillover effects, posits that integration in one sector inevitably leads to integration in others, a pattern that fails to materialise consistently outside the European context (Haas, 1958). Intergovernmentalism, focusing on state–driven integration, overlooks the complex web of non–state actors crucial in shaping regional dynamics in the

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_26

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Global South (Moravcsik, 1993). Even new regionalism, despite its purported broadening of scope, remains tethered to Eurocentric assumptions about regional formation and development, often neglecting the unique historical and cultural contexts that drive regionalism elsewhere (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000).

This Eurocentric bias has led to a pervasive *EU-centrism* in regionalism studies, creating a distorted lens through which all regional projects are viewed and evaluated (Acharya, 2016). The European Union (EU), elevated to the status of a gold standard, becomes an implicit benchmark against which other regional initiatives are measured and often found wanting. This approach not only misrepresents the diverse realities of regionalism globally but also perpetuates a form of academic neo-colonialism, marginalising alternative models and experiences. The result is a field of study that, while claiming universality, is fundamentally ill-equipped to understand or explain the majority of regional dynamics in the world today.

The application of mainstream theories to the Global South reveals not just limitations but also fundamental incompatibilities. The rich tapestry of regional cooperation in Africa, Asia, and Latin America defies the narrow confines of Eurocentric models. While European integration was primarily driven by economic and security imperatives in the post-World War II context, regionalism in the Global South often emerges from a complex interplay of post-colonial nation-building, resistance to global power structures, and collective development aspirations (Söderbaum, 2016). The formation of the African Union, for instance, was as much about pan-African identity and political solidarity as it was about economic integration. This multifaceted motivation challenges the linear, economically deterministic models prevalent in mainstream theories.

Global South Regional Organisations' Distinct Characteristics and Challenges to Mainstream Theorising

The rigid institutional frameworks emphasised by mainstream theories are often anathema to Global South regional organisations. The *ASEAN Way*, with its emphasis on consensus-building, non-interference, and flexible engagement, represents a deliberate rejection of the legalistic, supranational approach favoured by the EU (Acharya, 2001). This flexibility is not a deficiency but a strategic choice that reflects deep-seated historical and cultural preferences. It allows for a form of regionalism that is more adaptable to changing geopolitical realities and more respectful of the diverse political systems within the region. The success of ASEAN in maintaining regional stability and fostering economic cooperation, despite its apparent lack of strong centralised institutions, challenges the core assumptions of mainstream regionalism theories.

The profound influence of external powers and global institutions on regional processes in the Global South is a critical factor overlooked by mainstream theories. The complex interplay between African regional organisations, former colonial powers, emerging economies like China, and international financial institutions fundamentally shapes the trajectory of African regionalism in ways that defy simplistic internal dynamics models (Söderbaum & Taylor, 2003). For example, the role of the African Development Bank in supporting regional infrastructure projects or China's Belt and Road Initiative in reshaping regional economic landscapes demonstrates how external actors can be integral to regional processes. This external dimension demands theoretical frameworks that can account for the multi-layered nature of regional dynamics in a globalised world.

For many Global South regions, economic development and poverty reduction are not mere side effects but the primary objectives of regional cooperation. The development-focused regionalism of organisations like MERCOSUR in South America or SADC in Southern Africa demands theoretical frameworks that place development at the centre, not the periphery, of regional integration processes (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012). These organisations often prioritise projects aimed at addressing shared developmental challenges, such as infrastructure deficits or food security, over traditional market integration. This development imperative challenges the assumption that trade liberalisation and market integration are the primary drivers of regionalism, as often portrayed in mainstream theories.

Shared historical experiences, cultural affinities, and collective struggles against colonialism often serve as powerful catalysts for regional cooperation in the Global South. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) exemplifies how shared ideological commitments and cultural bonds can drive regional integration in ways unaccounted for by mainstream theories (Muhr, 2011). ALBA's focus on social welfare, cultural exchange, and political solidarity represents a form of regionalism that prioritises social and political goals over economic integration. Similarly, the historical legacy of Pan-Africanism continues to shape African regional initiatives in ways that transcend the economic rationality assumed by many mainstream theories.

The experiences of regionalism in the Global South offer not just lessons but imperatives for a fundamental reimagining of regionalism theories. The African Union's innovative approach, blending elements of supranationalism with a strong respect for national sovereignty, demolishes the false dichotomy between inter-governmentalism and supranationalism prevalent in mainstream theories (Welz, 2013). This hybridisation demands a more nuanced, non-linear conceptualisation of regional integration pathways. The AU's peace and security architecture, for instance, demonstrates how regional organisations can develop supranational capacities in specific areas while maintaining intergovernmental approaches in others, challenging the notion of a single trajectory of regional integration.

The BRICS grouping and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) demonstrate the power and efficacy of informal, loosely structured regional and transregional cooperation. These arrangements challenge the very foundations of mainstream theories that equate regionalism with formal institutionalisation (Cooper & Flemes,

2013). The BRICS, in particular, shows how shared interests among geographically dispersed emerging powers can create effective platforms for cooperation without the need for rigid institutional structures. This form of flexible, issue-based regionalism is increasingly prevalent in the Global South but remains under-theorised in mainstream approaches.

Organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) adopt holistic approaches to security that encompass non-traditional threats, economic cooperation, and cultural exchange. This multidimensional conceptualisation of security exposes the inadequacy of traditional security-focused explanations of regional cooperation (Aris, 2011). The SCO's engagement with issues ranging from counterterrorism to energy security and cultural diplomacy reflects a comprehensive understanding of regional security that goes beyond military alliances or economic interdependence. Such approaches require theoretical frameworks capable of capturing the interconnected nature of security, economic, and cultural dimensions in regional cooperation.

The intricate relationship between regional integration and national development strategies, as exemplified by African Regional Economic Communities (RECs), demands a fundamental rethinking of the goals and processes of regionalism. This nexus challenges the artificial separation of development studies and regionalism theories (Hartmann, 2016). RECs like ECOWAS or EAC often serve as vehicles for implementing national development plans at a regional scale, blurring the lines between national and regional development strategies. This interplay between national and regional development objectives requires theoretical approaches that can account for the multi-scalar nature of development processes in the Global South.

ASEAN's pivotal role in shaping the broader Asia-Pacific regional architecture underscores the need for theoretical approaches that can capture the complex, bidirectional interactions between regional and global processes. This demands a move beyond the simplistic regional-global dichotomy prevalent in mainstream theories (Acharya, 2014). ASEAN's centrality in forums like the East Asia Summit or ASEAN Regional Forum demonstrates how regional organisations can act as nodes in broader networks of global governance. This networked approach to regionalism, where regional organisations serve as bridges between the local and the global, requires new theoretical tools to comprehend its dynamics and implications fully.

Alternative Theoretical Approaches

The lessons from the Global South are not mere addendums to existing theories but call for a radical decolonisation of regionalism studies. We must abandon the pretence of universality in existing theories and build new comparative frameworks that are genuinely global in their conception and application (Tickner & Waever, 2009). This approach must start from the diverse experiences of regionalism worldwide rather than attempting to fit global realities into pre-existing European models. It requires a fundamental shift in how we conceptualise regions themselves, moving away from

fixed geographical notions to more fluid understandings that reflect the complex realities of contemporary global politics.

The complex realities of Global South regionalism demand an integration of insights from development studies, postcolonial theory, and area studies into the core of regionalism theories. This is not about adding perspectives but fundamentally reimagining the theoretical foundations of the field (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Postcolonial approaches, for instance, can help us understand how historical legacies of colonialism continue to shape regional dynamics, while development studies can provide insights into how regional cooperation intersects with broader development challenges. This interdisciplinary approach is essential for developing theories that can capture the multifaceted nature of regionalism in the Global South.

Moving beyond state-centric models, we must develop theoretical frameworks that can capture the complex interplay of state and non-state actors, including civil society organisations, business networks, and transnational social movements, in shaping regional processes (Söderbaum & Shaw, 2003). The role of civil society in driving regional integration in areas like human rights or environmental protection in Latin America, or the influence of business networks in shaping ASEAN's economic policies, demonstrates the need for more inclusive models of regional agency. Actor-network approaches that can map these complex webs of interaction offer promising avenues for reconceptualising regionalism beyond state-centric paradigms.

A profound engagement with the historical trajectories and specific contexts of regional projects is essential. This approach rejects the ahistorical tendencies of mainstream theories and recognises the deep historical roots and path dependencies of regional formations (Fawcett & Gandois, 2010). Understanding the historical evolution of regional projects, from pan-Arabism in the Middle East to pan-Africanism in Africa, is crucial for developing theories that can account for the long-term processes shaping regional dynamics. This historical depth allows us to see regionalism not as a recent phenomenon but as part of long-standing patterns of interaction and identity formation.

Facilitating robust dialogue and knowledge exchange among scholars and practitioners from different regions of the Global South is crucial. This dialogue should aim not just at sharing experiences but at co-creating new theoretical paradigms that reflect the diversity and complexity of global regionalism (Acharya & Johnston, 2007). Platforms for South-South academic cooperation, such as the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO) or the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), offer models for fostering such dialogues. These exchanges can help in developing theoretical approaches that are both globally informed and locally grounded.

Conclusion

The contextualising of mainstream regionalism theories through the lens of Global South experiences reveals not just limitations but a fundamental crisis in the field of regionalism studies. The diverse motivations, institutional forms, and external influences shaping regionalism in the Global South offer not just lessons but a mandate for a paradigm shift in how we conceptualise and study regional cooperation and integration. This shift is not merely academic but has profound implications for policy and practice, potentially leading to more effective and contextually appropriate regional initiatives.

This essay calls for nothing less than a decolonisation of regionalism studies. By centring the experiences, innovations, and challenges of Global South regionalisms, we can move towards a truly global understanding of regionalism that reflects the complex realities of our multipolar world. This reconceptualisation is not merely an academic exercise but a crucial step in developing more effective, equitable, and contextually relevant approaches to regional challenges and opportunities in the twenty-first century. It offers the potential to unlock new ways of thinking about regional cooperation that can address pressing global issues, from climate change to economic inequality, in ways that are sensitive to diverse local contexts.

The future of regionalism studies lies not in tweaking existing Eurocentric models but in boldly embracing the rich diversity of regional experiences worldwide. Only through this fundamental reorientation can we hope to develop theoretical frameworks that are both globally relevant and locally resonant, capable of capturing the true complexity and potential of regionalism in all its myriad forms. This reimaged field of study can contribute not only to our academic understanding but also to the practical work of building more effective and inclusive regional organisations that can meet the challenges of our interconnected world.

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Essay 27: From Intra-Africa Functionalism to Continental Federalism: Theorising Regionalism and Regional Cooperation in Africa



Victor Adetula

Introduction

The world is witnessing a rise in regionalism, but challenges such as Brexit, growing Euroscepticism, declining multilateralism, and the breakdown of international regulations and global governance are impacting this trend. Nevertheless, some regions are broadening their focus to include economic and political aspects. These developments necessitate a reassessment of mainstream theorising on regionalism beyond the European integration exemplified by the European Union, achieving economic and monetary union across most of Europe. For example, the European integration framework may not be directly applicable to Africa, indicating the need to rethink African integration outside traditional theories. However, this rethinking must be approached with caution. This essay explores the historical and theoretical evolution of regionalism and regional cooperation in Africa, transitioning from intra-African functionalism to continental federalism.

Regional Integration in Africa from European Perspectives

Regional integration, rooted in historical context, involves formal agreements that require political and economic commitments, while regional cooperation is a more flexible approach to addressing daily needs. In Europe, cooperation has progressed into deeper integration through agreements and pacts like the Treaty of Rome, the Maastricht Treaty, and the Lisbon Treaty. In contrast, many African regional initiatives have remained focused on cooperation. Following independence, Africa saw the rise of self-styled common markets, federations, and unions, inspired by the

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success of the European Economic Community (EEC) and the influence of European integrationists, often based on functionalism and customs union theory. In Africa, even though there were already in existence the East African Community and some efforts towards regional cooperation, post-independence saw the emergence of some self-styled common markets, federations, unions, and communities inspired by the perceived success of the European Economic Community (EEC) as a regional organisation and the increasing influence of European integrationists. Most of these regional organisations in post-independence Africa have often followed principles of functionalism, neo-functionalism, federalism, customs union theory, and, to some extent, dependency formulations. European integration is no longer sufficient as a reference point for regional integration in Africa. African integration is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon influenced by diverse socio-economic and political dynamics distinct from those in Europe, underscoring the need for a deeper understanding of these unique dynamics.

Functionalism and federalism, as two regional integration strategies, present a potential shift from the sovereign nation-state. David Mitrany's perspective on the division into competing political units as a cause of international conflict, while challenging, also calls for a sense of caution. He argued that a world federal government, though theoretically possible, would be difficult to establish due to modern disregard for constitutions and nationalism. Instead, he proposed a functional approach promoting cooperation across sectors, gradually creating a web of international activities and agencies that integrate national interests (Mitrany, 1946). This pragmatic, technocratic strategy would blur distinctions between national and international spheres, making national divisions less significant. While some functionalists support a central authority, Mitrany suggested that successful international relations might not require such a government. He held a different view from many other functionalists and neo-functionalists, who considered federal institutions essential for the success of functional integration (Mitrany, 1946).

The neo-functionalists likened an actor's behaviour in a regional setting to that in a modern pluralist nation-state motivated by self-interest. They concluded that a continuum between economic integration and political union is made possible through automatic politicisation. As a regional integration theory, neo-functionalism identifies three causal factors that interact. These are (i) growing economic interdependence between nations, (ii) organisational capacity to resolve disputes and build international legal regimes, and (iii) supranational market rules that replace national regulatory regimes (Haas, 1961; Sandholtz & Sweet, 1997). There is a sense in which early neo-functionalist theory reflects the idealist assumption that nation-states would pursue welfare objectives through their commitment to political and market integration at a higher, supranational level.

Neo-functionalists argue that actors are involved in an incremental decision-making process, beginning with economic and social matters (welfare maximisation) and gradually moving to the political sphere. Ernst Haas describes integration as "the process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectation and political activities towards a new and larger centre whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the

pre-existing national states” (Haas, 1958, p. 16). In alignment with Haas, Philippe Schmitter defines the study of regional integration as one “of how national units come to share part or all of their decisional authority with an international organisation” (Schmitter, 1970, p. 836). The neo-functionalists prescribe “supranational agency” as a condition for “effective problem-solving” which slowly extends its authority so as “to progressively undermine the independence of the nation-states” (Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970, p. 6).

The notion that politics can be separated from welfare issues and that international organisations hold significant potential represents a fundamental misconception by functionalists and neo-functionalists who believe peace can be achieved through economic and social internationalisation. This raises the question of whether states will engage in functional sectors prior to addressing political and security issues that divide them. The increasing recognition of peace as a prerequisite for development, combined with the prevalence of violent conflicts in Africa, has led African states to take the initiative in broadening the mandates of regional economic communities. They have expanded these mandates to encompass responsibilities for ensuring regional peace, promoting democracy, good governance, and human rights, demonstrating their agency and decision-making in the process. Inis Claude asserted that “the insistence upon putting first things first by functionalist logic does not settle the matter of what things are first” (1964, p. 35). This concern was expressed in diverse responses and reactions to the expanded mandates of the African RECs. The variety of reactions, from welcoming the development as a timely and reasonable initiative to promoting peace and security on the continent, to arguing that resources intended for economic objectives are being redirected to actualise the *new mandate*, underscores the complexity of the regional integration process.

Sovereignty is a complex and critical factor in African regional integration theory and practice. The transfer of loyalty and sovereignty from states to international organisations, known as the *transfer of allegiance*, is a concept that signifies the shift in loyalty and commitment from a state to an international organisation. This transfer is believed to serve the interests of both people and states better. However, unlike European institutions, which demonstrate that people are willing and able to push governments to transfer powers to international bodies, only a few African regional organisations have made significant progress toward this goal. In alignment with Malamud and Schmitter’s (2011) view that absolute sovereignty transfers should not exclusively define regional integration, we should recognise that various activities contribute to integration without necessarily leading to sovereignty transfer. If we see regional integration as a process, we can appreciate the integrative efforts in Africa, such as Nigeria’s military interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, supported by ECOWAS. These efforts led to the development of structures like the ECOWAS Protocol for conflict management, illustrating how decisions based on treaties can reflect a transfer of sovereignty among member states. Decisions to remove trade barriers in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) are binding, indicating a transfer of authority or sovereignty to an international institution.

Customs Union Theory and UNECA-OAU-AU Economic Groupings

Regional integration practices in Africa have been significantly influenced by European integration theories and perspectives. Additionally, these practices have gained strength from traditional customs union theory, as articulated by Viner in 1950. This is particularly evident in the regional economic communities prioritising trade and market development, intending to eliminate trade and tariff discrimination among member nations. Many regional integration schemes in Africa are in this category, with an emphasis on *trade creation* and *trade diversion* as the basis for evaluating the gains and losses of regional integration. These include the EAC, Southern African Development Community (SADC), Economic Community of Central African States (CEMAC), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). These integration schemes, particularly the sub-regional economic groupings such as the ECOWAS and the East African Community (EAC), which have a rich historical context, have recently expanded their mandates to include regional collective security, marking a significant shift in their focus. Previously, their efforts primarily focused on economic agendas, including market expansion, trade liberalisation, and adopting import-substitution strategies.

The effects of *trade diversion* and *trade creation* vary between Europe and the global South according to social conditions. The experiences in Africa and other global South regions have shown that customs union schemes were often abandoned when it became costly to buy within the union. In the 1990s, some African countries removed trade barriers, only to quickly reinstate them to protect their national industries. Arthur Hazlewood pointed out that removing barriers between African countries would not change the production pattern within the union but would replace the high cost of domestic production with cheaper supplies from other members of the union (1967, p. 6). Adebayo Adedeji was sceptical about forming a customs union in West Africa (1970, p. 210). Joseph Nye's study on East African integration revealed the limitations of applying European theories to non-industrial societies, suggesting that economic integration in less developed countries involves high politics rather than welfare (Nye, 1965; Hansen, 1969, p. 256). Additionally, Adele Jinadu noted the significance of external factors in African regional integration due to the reliance of African economies on these influences (Jinadu, 1976, p. 281).

The Organisation of African Unity (OAU), which preceded the African Union (AU), aimed for African unity through a partnership with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), emphasising self-reliance and economic growth as pathways to integration (UNECA, n.d.). They believed that successful sub-regional initiatives would serve as a foundation for broader continental integration. UNECA identified the fragmented political landscape and small internal markets as barriers to economic development, advocating for the establishment of effective regional markets. In the late 1970s, the OAU collaborated with UNECA, leading to significant initiatives such as the *Monrovia Colloquium* and the

Lagos Plan of Action (LPA), which aimed to establish an African Common Market by 2000. Despite efforts leading to the establishment of the PTA and COMESA, progress has been limited, with foreign capital often benefiting the most from trade liberalisation.

In 2000, the African Union (AU) replaced the OAU, expanding its objectives to include peace, security, governance, and sustainable development. The AfCFTA, operational since May 2019, aims to create a tariff-free continental market, increasing intra-African trade, which currently stands at about 10%. The AfCFTA hopes to benefit small and medium enterprises by providing them with a larger market. However, its implementation may exacerbate tensions, as the effects of tariff removal could vary widely between nations, favouring those with robust manufacturing sectors while disadvantaging others.

Continental Federalism: Towards a United States for Africa

Arguably, the world is experiencing a re-awakening of supranationalism. The EU's development of a hybrid model, which effectively balances *inter-governmentalism* and *supranationalism* in response to the tension between these rising tides and nationalism, is particularly attractive to African leaders. These leaders, who previously "held on to the idea of nation-state and national sovereignty," now "appear to be on the path towards rejecting both." The driving force behind this shift is the new Pan-African consciousness, which has spurred many African leaders towards a renewed commitment to regional and continental integration through binding treaties and agreements (Oppong, 2011, p.1). The transformation of the OAU to AU in 2002, as the continental, intergovernmental organisation of African states, towards the establishment of a political and economic union, in some respects, benefited from the paradigm shift in regional integration that favours the cohabitation of supranationalism and inter-governmentalism.

The AU sets for itself the ambition of building, by the year 2025, "A united and integrated Africa" along the objective that was first expressed in the *Sirte Declaration* in 1999 and later in 2007 with the *Accra Declaration*, which aims "to accelerate the political and economic integration of the African continent, including the formation of a union government for Africa, with the ultimate objective of creating the United States of Africa," and coupled with the AU's Agenda 2063 roadmap towards "an integrated Africa." With the creation of the AU Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD), the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and its expanded mandate were integrated into the AU. These and other efforts towards strengthening the supranational structure within the AU to promote regional integration beyond the traditional restraining powers of sovereign states demonstrated a commitment to encourage Pan-African regional integration over and above the pseudo-nationalist

and state-centric notion of sovereignty. These have further consolidated the institutionalisation of supranationalism in the African integration process, which is increasingly inclined towards a federalist approach, underscoring the AU's commitment to a united Africa.

Notwithstanding, the debate regarding the feasibility of the proposed union government is ongoing. It is evidence that the historical disagreement between the *maximalist* (advocating for a rapid and comprehensive integration), *minimalist* (favouring a slow and selective integration), *gradualist* (supporting a moderate and phased integration), and *skeptical* (doubting the feasibility of integration) approaches to economic and, particularly, political integration in Africa have resurfaced but now over the timeline for creating the United States of Africa (Jinadu, n.d). Another area of disagreement is the political and constitutional framework that guides the relationship between the AU and member states, especially in the case of the devolution of powers from member states to an AU Government in some critical areas. There is also a concern about sharing powers and functions between African national, regional, and continental jurisdictions. In more specific terms, this refers to the assignment of competencies between the African Union Government and the member-states based on the principle of subsidiarity, "which states that competence in a particular policy area should be reserved for the tier of government that can best perform it efficiently" (Jinadu, 2009). In practice, this system may come with some challenges that require strong political will on the part of the member states, who, for example, can choose and decide when and how to transfer their autonomy to the Union Government and in what specific policy areas and sectors.

The Constitutive Act provides for the Pan-African Parliament (PAP) as an institution with full legislative powers in the affairs of the AU. The PAP was established in 2002 with many promises to empower and promote popular participation and representation of African peoples as an indication of renewed commitment to good governance, transparency and accountability on the continent. AU's Agenda 2063 also acknowledges the importance of the PAP, which the APRM can engage with more vigorously. The PAP has noted the "symbiosis of the APRM process and parliamentary work and had shown interest, immediately after the establishment of the APRM, in engaging and mobilising African national and regional parliaments in support of APRM processes." This proactive role of the PAP in engaging and mobilising African parliaments is a significant step towards ensuring widespread support for the APRM processes, thereby enhancing its effectiveness and impact.

The catalogue of disappointment in regional integration schemes in Africa, from OAU through AEC to AU and the RECs, makes one wonder whether there are areas of competence for the proposed Union Government, considered in terms of the poor performance of regional integration schemes in Africa. Also, it is not as simple as envisaged by some that member-states will always devolve their legislative competence to a supranational body, both for their enlightened national interests and for the sake of advantages accruing from economies of scale. These hurdles must be addressed as the AU forges ahead in transforming into the United States of Africa.

While the seemingly dominant Eurocentric perspectives on the discourse on regionalism in Africa, mainly on the grounds that the experiences and models of

European integration can be universally applied, are faulty, there are valuable lessons from the process and outcomes of European integration for Africa. Arguably, the assumption about the universalist aspiration of European integration theories is flawed because it overlooks the distinct roles, statuses, and conditions of African countries within the international division of labour. Thus, the European integration experience and the theories formulated for it must be adequately contextualised when applied to the African setting. This aligns with Constantine Vaitos' suggestion that any analysis of integration in less developed regions should consider the conditions imposed by the economic and political environment within which regional schemes operate (Vaitos, 1978, p. 720). Vaitos advocates for regional integration based on four key issues: 1) local socio-economic and political interests served by integration; 2) influence of foreign governments and private interests; 3) the relationship between structural characteristics and choice of integration schemes; and 4) key issues relating to the process and duration of integration stages, the specific nature of trade, and the need for inter-country distributional considerations (Vaitos, 1978, pp. 720–747).

Similarly, other scholars have noted that the cooperative efforts of Third World countries are frequently influenced and shaped by the dominant interests of the global North, leading to integration arrangements that ultimately benefit external powers rather than the African nations themselves (Onwuka, 1991, p. 5). Moreover, they specifically criticise the role of the industrial bourgeoisie in global regional integration, noting how the processes of over-capitalisation and the imposition of foreign market conditions serve to sustain the dependency of African economies. This is further perpetuated by institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the ongoing debt crises, and the activities of Transnational Corporations (TNCs) (Onwuka, 1991, p. 5). The role of external forces and global pressure on regional integration cannot be discounted. However, it is important that African countries individually develop their state capacity to enhance their collective bargaining to address the influence of externalities to guarantee collective self-reliance.

Closely related is the dependency theorists' advocacy for a re-conceptualisation of the purpose of regional integration in the global South, calling for an approach that is more autonomous and self-determined. They emphasise the need to prioritise the unique economic and social realities of African countries, aiming to stimulate economic growth and eliminate underdevelopment through internal cooperation (Asante, 1986; Mytelka, 1973, 1979; Onwuka & Sesay, 1985; Okolo & Wright, 1990). This perspective seeks to empower African nations to develop integration strategies that are genuinely beneficial to their development goals, rather than serving external interests.

Conclusion

There are questions regarding the adherence of African regional integration schemes to mainstream theories of European integration. Richard Gibb sums it up pointedly in his critique of the role of the West in “imposing and sustaining a discursive hegemony over regionalism” in the global South, which drives a “modernist” conception of regional integration. He is of the view that “African regionalism has been pursued, both theoretically and empirically, in terms of a neoliberal, free market and Westphalian state model built upon the experiences, values and norms of European integration,” which is “limited and structurally inappropriate” for Africa’s realities (2009, p. 702).

A new awareness is growing in Africa seeking an explanation of the performance of existing regional integration schemes beyond the allegiance to the theories of European integration, especially those that accord prominence to the gradualist strategy that takes social and economic cooperation as the necessary first step towards regional integration. It has been observed that there are defects in applying such Western theoretical constructs to the African setting without adequate contextualising. For instance, there are political factors critical to the evolution and operation of African integration, which these Western models - functionalism, neo-functionalism, market integration theory and the customs union theory-conceal in the bid to neutralise the ideological aspects of the regional integration process. Such considerations include the question of power relations (national and regional), the nature and orientation of the state, control over foreign capital, the dominant ideology, and the direction of class struggle and social conflicts (national, regional and global levels). All these are essential in designing the approach to African regional integration.

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Essay 28: The Fading Shadow of the Neo-Functional Theoretical Approach to Regionalism: Evidence from European and African Regionalism



Ernest Tooche Aniche

Introduction and Background: Regional Integration or Regional Cooperation?

Most scholars use the terms *regional cooperation* and *regional integration* interchangeably due to their close relationship (Sesay & Omotosho, 2011; Tetteh, 1998). The latter is more issue-specific than the former and is a far weaker and looser type of cooperation among sovereign governments. This is because regional cooperation does not necessitate the establishment of supranational organisations, since participating states maintain a significant amount of their political sovereignty and can easily choose to withdraw from the agreement. In contrast, regional integration could result in the creation of a free trade area, common external tariff (CET), customs union, common market, common currency, monetary union, or even political union among the integrating states in the long run (Aniche et al., 2023; Balassa, 1961).

Regional cooperation is also considered a process by which states within a particular region increase their interaction with regard to economic, trade, social, cultural, political, and security issues (Ginket, 2003; Haas, 1968). Deutsch (1989), on the other hand, defines regional integration as “cooperation among political entities leading to the formation of a new centre and the creation of a sense of identity and an integrated community.” To Haas (1971, p. 3), regional integration is “a tendency towards the voluntary creation of larger political units, each of which self-consciously eschews the use of force in the relations between the participating units and groups.”

Therefore, it is clear from the aforementioned definitions that regional cooperation and integration are too closely related to be distinguished from one another. This is due to the fact that integration cannot occur without cooperation, but cooperation may eventually lead to integration. Thus, if regional collaboration is the initial stage toward regional integration, then regional integration is the advanced stage of regional

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_28

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cooperation. In other words, attempting to distinguish between the two could be pointless (Aniche, 2021).

More importantly, ‘regionalism’ may be substituted for the two concepts. Since regionalism is a regional strategy or framework for the economic development and transformation of a region’s member states, it is frequently referred to as developmental regionalism, as is the case with European and African regionalism (Aniche, 2020a). While the European Union (EU) exemplifies European regionalism, the newly established African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and regional economic communities (RECs) of the African Union reflect African regionalism (Aniche, 2024). In the field of International Relations, regionalism or regional integration in Europe and Africa has traditionally been defined or explained by mainstream neo-liberal theories of integration like neo-functionalism, intergovernmentalism, and complex interdependence theory.

In this context, I subsequently interrogate the relevance of neo-functionalism in the twenty-first century using European integration and African regionalism as case studies. The British exit (Brexit) from the EU in 2016 and other related events capture the receding relevance of neo-functionalism as a theoretical approach to European regionalism and a vindication of intergovernmentalism. I further critique the explanatory inadequacy and analytical disutility of neo-functionalism for explaining the shortcomings of regionalism in Europe and Africa. In addition, I appraise the neo-functionalist theoretical approach to pan-African regionalism in the post-independence era. I finally advocate for a post-neo-functionalist approach to African developmental regionalism, which I call post-nationalism (towards supranationalism) or post-neo-functionalism (beyond neo-functionalism).

European Integration: Brexit as a Critique of Neo-Functionalism and a Vindication of Intergovernmentalism

The outcome of the June 23, 2016, Brexit Referendum is both a critique of neo-functionalism and a validation or vindication of intergovernmentalism because nationalism trumped supranationalism. Since its inception, European integration has followed the neo-functionalism of authors such as Ernst B. Haas, Jean Monnet, and John Galtung. By expanding the domain and deepening its scope, the European Union (EU) essentially adopted John Galtung’s Staircase Hypothesis, a neo-functionalist paradigm (Haas, 1958). For instance, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) started with the membership of six countries and gradually extended its domain by admitting 28 member countries. Also, it started with limited areas of cooperation, such as coal and steel, and eventually deepened the scope by including trade, investment, monetary/currency, immigration, economy, and politics (Aniche, 2021).

In order to get beyond these challenges and setbacks, the EU eventually adopted a neo-functional strategy for regional integration that was pragmatic in nature. It was implied that when the EU introduced opt-outs as a means of pursuing regional supranationalism, it started to depart from the neo-functional paradigm. The three major examples of these opt-outs were the Schengen Border Free Zone Agreement, the Single Currency and Monetary Union Agreement, and Article 50 of the EU Treaty for membership opt-outs. The United Kingdom (UK) has availed itself of all these opt-outs. The UK opted out of the 1999 Schengen Agreement of the Amsterdam Treaty, the single currency and monetary union of the Maastricht Treaty and recently conducted an exit referendum to trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty (Sapir, 2011; Aniche, 2020b).

The three fundamental mechanisms of neo-functionalism—the mechanism of transfer in domestic allegiance, the mechanism of technocratic automaticity, and the mechanism of positive spillover effect—have all been undermined by Brexit (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2008; Mitrany, 1948, 1965). The idea behind the so-called ‘invisible hand’ of the positive spill-over effect, which was taken from David Mitrany’s classical functionalism, is that the neo-functional approach to regional integration is defined by its internal dynamics, which act as a catalyst to stimulate further integration (Haas, 1964; Mitrany, 1966, 1976).

In contrast to the positive spill-over effect of the neo-functional mechanism, which assumes that cooperation between states in one sector will trigger integration in other sectors, the outcome of Brexit raised fears of a disintegrative or negative spill-over. This process created regional supranational institutions that operate independently of national governments or governments of member states (Schmitter & Lefkofridi, 2016; Aje & Chidozie, 2020). In fact, the Lisbon Treaty’s Articles 49 and 50—which gave the UK government the authority to demand a Brexit referendum—deviate from and refute Ernst B. Haas’s neo-functionalism.

The outcome of the Brexit referendum, in which different groups and associations in the UK canvassed against *remain* and campaigned for *leave*, ultimately resulted in a majority of UK citizens voting to leave. This went against the neo-functional principle of transfer in domestic allegiances, which holds that as integration gains traction, interest groups and other associations within each member state’s pluralistic societies will shift their allegiances from national institutions to supranational regional institutions. Perhaps this means that the majority of UK citizens are yet to realise that the EU is a better channel through which they can pursue their material interests than the national institutions (Aniche, 2020b).

Furthermore, the outcome of the Brexit referendum on June 3, 2016, which will ultimately stall the momentum of European integration or the EU’s disintegration, disproved the theory of technocratic automaticity, which holds that as integration accelerates, the regional supranational institutions tasked with overseeing it will take the initiative to promote, inspire, or sponsor further integration as they grow stronger and more independent of the member states. It follows that European integration has not really been carried to higher decision-making levels, despite the third neo-functional principle’s assumption of growing regulatory complexity (Aniche, 2020b).

The Lisbon Treaty's adoption of Articles 49 and 50 caused European integration to lose momentum in the twenty-first century. The result of that lack of impetus is Brexit, which completely defies both the main thesis and the three pillars of neo-functionalism. Put another way, the result of Brexit refutes the organising principle of neo-functional theory (positive spill-over effect), which holds that political integration will eventually follow economic integration as an inevitable byproduct, or that integration in non-conflictual matters (or the economic sector) will eventually transform into political integration as the state's sovereignty is increasingly undermined (Aniche, 2020b).

Many scholars have long since declared neo-functionalism to be outdated at the point where the EU started to stray from some of its core principles and when the trajectory of European integration began to change in the early years of the twenty-first century as a result of unforeseen and unpredictable setbacks in the process (Tranholm-Mikkelsen, 1991). Brexit and other instances above have demonstrated the receding relevance of neo-functionalism (Aniche, 2020b).

Brexit, then, is a validation of intergovernmentalism, an alternative theory of regional integration put forth by Stanley Hoffman and Andrew Moravcsik. This theory assumes that states continue to be the main actors in international relations and international integration and, as such, views regional integration as being driven by states. As a response to neo-functionalism, intergovernmentalism emerged as an inside-out methodology that uses state-level analysis to explain regional integration. It is anti-supranationalism and began with a rejection of neo-functionalist processes of regional integration. As a result, it rejects the idea of regional supranationalism and the positive spillover effect on the grounds that states have the power to regulate the pace of integration (Keohane & Hoffmann, 1991; Keohane & Martin, 1995; Moravcsik, 1997; Schmitter, 1970). The Brexit referendum result has only vindicated, justified, or upheld the underlying principle of intergovernmentalism that European integration is state-mediated in that states control the level of integration or speed of regionalism based on the domestic political and economic issues of the day (Aniche, 2020b).

The case of European integration is also evidenced in the case of African regionalism, though differently. These defects of neo-functionalism in the case of African integration are evidenced in the RECs and AfCFTA. As discussed below, this is implicated by the fact that after decades of defective implementation of the neo-functionalist theoretical approach to African developmental regionalism, the AU's RECs have not been able to achieve the main objectives of collective self-reliance and development.

African Regionalism: RECs/AfCFTA as a Critique of Neo-Functionalist Theoretical Approach

The main critique of neo-functionalism is the ambivalent, erroneously executed neo-functional approach to African integration as reflected in RECs and AfCFTA. Indeed, the dominant institutionalist neo-liberal theories of supranationalism and regional integration (especially neo-functionalism) are fundamentally theories of European integration. They are Western and focused on Europe. The AU and the EU have quite different political environments. The erratic course of nationalism's rise in the EU dealt a severe blow to neo-functionalism's explanatory values, even in the context of European integration. As a result, a lot of its proponents started challenging it (Aniche, 2020a; Hoffmann, 1966; Haas, 1975; Hettne, 2003; Nye, 1968; Schmitter, 2003; Tranholm-Mikkelsen, 1991; Warleigh-Lack, 2006).

One of the major defects of neo-functionalism is that it assumes that regional integration is a gradual and linear process, making the explanation of setbacks difficult. This also undermines the ability of the theory to predict, pre-empt, and prevent setbacks in regional integration (Aniche, 2020b; Haas, 1976; Hettne, 2005; Schmitter, 1969; Wheeler, 2002). As stated earlier, a good example of this is the outcome of the Brexit Referendum of June 23, 2016, in which British citizens voted to leave the EU. Brexit negated the three core mechanisms of neo-functionalism. More specifically, it shows that European integration, just like its African counterpart, has always been fundamentally state-driven despite supranational claims of neo-functionalism (Aniche, 2020a). Therefore, due to the defective implementation of neo-functionalism in the RECs and AfCFTA, African regionalism has been state-centric, institution-driven, and top-down (Aniche et al., 2023).

Another of its defects is that neo-functionalism assumes that the integration of states is an integration of equals rather than seeing it as the integration of 'unequal'. In other words, it presumes that regional integration is a relationship of interdependence rather than a relationship of dependence. This suggests that neo-functionalism conceives regional cooperation as symmetrical rather than asymmetrical integration. As such, the idea falls short of describing both the integration of African state dependencies and the reliance of African economies on Western economies. It is not analytically useful to analyse the fact that African economies are more vertically integrated into Western economies and structurally dependent on them than they are horizontally integrated. In order to comprehend why intra-African commerce has been as low as 10%, or as low as compared to other intra-regional trade, and why Africa only makes up 4% of global trade, it is not analytically useful (Aniche, 2023).

The poor explanatory value of neo-functional theory is also demonstrated by the fact that African regionalism has failed as a means of collective self-reliance. Neo-functionalism does not provide a sufficient basis to explain the fact that, after more than five decades, African regionalism has yet to address African developmental challenges. It has no solution to some of the challenges militating against successful African integration, such as politico-ideological differences, the disparity in the size of African economies, variation in the development of African states,

fear of economic cum political domination, monopolisation of benefits, the unwillingness of some African leaders to surrender their sovereignty, internally vertical linkages of weaker African economies to regional economic hegemons, intractable civil strife, and the attendant refugee crises and internal displacements. This theoretical approach cannot provide the panacea for overcoming some of the obstacles to African regionalism like adverse activities of multinational corporations (MNCs) operating in Africa; neo-colonial ties; export-oriented primary products of African states; externally historical, political, economic, and vertical linkages of African economies to Western economies; and structural dependence of African economies on Western economies and now Chinese economy (Aniche, et al., 2022).

Consequently, the neo-functional approach has not been able to enable African regionalism as embodied in AU's RECs to overcome trade diversion, diverse trade regimes, and restrictive customs procedures; administrative, bureaucratic, and technical barriers; limited productive capacity; inadequate trade-related infrastructures, trade finance, and trade information; lack of factor market integration; and inadequate focus on internal market issues. Even the newly established AfCFTA is very unlikely to remedy these challenges and constraints (Aniche, 2023). There is a phenomenon of proliferation of RECs with contradictory resolutions, conflicting implementation/enforcement of resolutions, and overlapping membership of RECs with increasing financial commitment or obligation. This still begs the question of how RECs can co-exist with AfCFTA. Is this still in tandem with neo-functionalism, or has the neo-functional approach been jettisoned?

The neo-functional linear approach to African integration predisposes African states to proceed by forming free trade areas (FTAs), leading to customs unions, common markets, and monetary unions within predetermined timeframes. This trajectory process is deceptively successful. This is because member states are still at different levels of compliance. The effects have been fairly modest when measured in terms of trade growth, poverty alleviation, and the formation of efficient collective governance systems. In the first place, this top-down approach to regional integration does not prioritise the right answers for the root reasons, which in turn impedes the growth of intra-regional commerce. Since transitioning from a free trade agreement to a customs union necessitates coordinated policies on tariffs as well as the harmonisation and coordination of national legislative frameworks, each new phase in the linear process entails extra costs. Institutions to oversee the CET are also needed, in addition to collective governance. This is difficult and costly given that some governments still rely on customs revenue, thereby frequently invoking a lack of capacity and sensitive national interests as justifications for derogations from legal obligations (Aniche, 2024).

Moreover, the major flaw of neo-functionalism is its view of extremely sensitive topics—like trade conditions and financial, investment, capital, economic, and developmental issues—as a non-political kind of cooperation. This is due to the fact that these extremely delicate and divisive matters of commerce, finance, investment, capital, and economic development represent significant national economic interests in relation to crucial matters of producing means of subsistence (Aniche et al., 2023).

Conclusion: Constructing an Alternative Theoretical Approach to African Integration

I have demonstrated that European and African regionalism serves as a critique of neo-functionalism. By relying on evidence from European and African integration, I was able to deconstruct the mainstream neo-liberal theoretical approaches to regional integration, particularly neo-functionalism. In the specific case of Africa, neo-functionalism is regarded as Eurocentric, Western, or one-size-fits-all—the erroneous assumption that what is good for Europe must be good for Africa and perhaps other regions. However, has it even been good for Europe? Therefore, it is not adequate for explaining the defects and setbacks of African integration or the AU's RECs and perhaps including the newly formed AfCFTA.

Therefore, there is a need to construct an alternative theoretical framework to pan-African regionalism, which I call post-nationalism or post-neo-functionalism (Aniche, 2024). It advocates a bottom-top, people-centred, or private-sector-driven cross-border business integration that involves a two-stage approach to African regionalism. The first stage involves the simultaneous application of security regionalism (SR) and economic regionalism (ER), while the second stage entails the adoption and implementation of political regionalism (PR). Security regionalism (security union) is not necessarily restricted to peacekeeping, peace enforcement, conflict management, and conflict resolution. It is expanded to include peacebuilding and conflict prevention, as is the case with the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), so as to help member states in nation-building, national integration, and national development (Aniche et al., 2022).

Whilst economic regionalism (economic union) is a concurrent application of (i) business regionalism (business mergers involving setting up the African Stock Exchange Market) and (ii) a gradual process of trade regionalism (free trade area to a customs union or common external tariff), market regionalism (single market or common market), and monetary regionalism (single currency or monetary union involving establishment of African Central Bank). The next stage, which is political regionalism (political union), involves ratification of the constitution and setting up a parliament (the highest law-making body) constituted by representatives of the people (no longer businesses) from different constituencies for a pan-African post-neo-functionalist model (Aniche, 2021).

Therefore, post-neo-functionalism possesses a better explanatory value and analytical utility than neo-functionalism in terms of explaining the implications of conflicting pan-Africanist theoretical approaches, overlapping memberships, and uncoordinated trade agreements for African developmental regionalisms. It proposes a clear solution for transforming Africa's extra-regional vertical integration to intra-regional horizontal integration, extra-regional structural dependence to interdependence, asymmetrical integration to symmetrical integration, unequal relations to equal relations, and intra-regional dependence to interdependence (Aniche et al., 2023).

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Essay 29: Regionalism and the Challenges of Pluralistic Security Communities: Case Study of the East African Community



Norman Sempijja and Hiba Ouzaouit

Introduction

In the wake of decolonisation and a more interconnected world, regionalism has become a key force in global politics. As the international system shifts toward multipolarity, with declining trust in multilateral institutions and rising regional powers, understanding how regions foster stability and governance is increasingly important. While many regional initiatives began with economic goals, the post-Cold War decline in inter-state conflicts shifted attention to intra-state crises, highlighting the need for collective security approaches. Karl Deutsch's concept of pluralistic security communities emphasises shared norms and institutions to reduce conflict among members Fig 1. However, the effectiveness of regionalism in tackling global security, political, and economic challenges remains uncertain.

In East Africa, the East African Community's (EAC) efforts to build a regional security framework face obstacles such as historical rivalries, territorial disputes, and conflicting national interests. Colonial legacies, including arbitrary borders, continue to fuel tensions, as seen in the 2019 Uganda-Rwanda border closure over espionage allegations and dissident support (Reuters, 2022). This incident disrupted trade and questioned the EAC's viability as a security community. Similar challenges elsewhere reveal the limits of regional actorness when states prioritise sovereignty over collective governance. However, porous borders, arms, human trafficking (Isoke, 2015), and refugee flows from Darfur and Somalia suggest that regional bodies may be better suited than nation-states or even the UN to handle transnational security issues.

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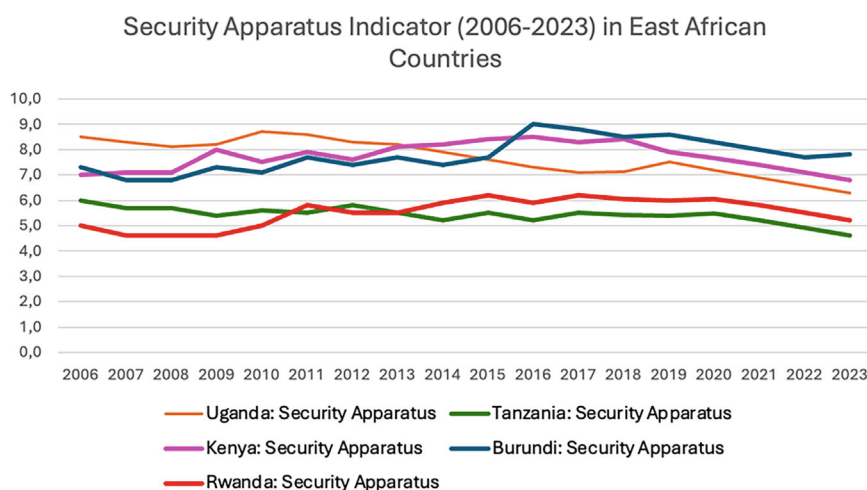


Fig. 1 Security Apparatus Indicator (2006–2023) in East African Countries *Source* Data compiled by the authors from the Fragile State Index

Regional organisations like the EAC face external influences and power imbalances, limiting their role in peace negotiations, as seen in Burundi (2015) and South Sudan (2012) (Anjalo et al., 2018). Political instability often requires mediation by actors like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and international figures such as Kofi Annan during Kenya's 2007 post-election crisis (Lindenmayer & Kaye, 2009). Ethnic tensions, including those leading to genocide in Rwanda and conflict in Burundi, further question whether regionalism fosters unity or deepens divisions (Isabirye & Mahmoudi, 2000).

This essay examines the complexities of regionalism and the challenges in forming pluralistic security communities in East Africa. Historical and cultural ties have been weakened by Westphalian state formations, fueling rivalries and cross-border conflicts. Non-state actors further destabilise the region, while implementation challenges persist at the national level even when decisions are made regionally (Jacobsen & Nordby, 2012). The lack of a unified military security approach (ibid.) exacerbates these issues, making regional integration and collective security a necessity and a persistent challenge.

Before analysing the EAC and pluralistic security communities, it is crucial first to examine the origins of the concept that emerged in the mid-twentieth century as an alternative to traditional security models, emphasising shared values, institutions, and trust. Understanding its theoretical foundations provides a framework for assessing regional security arrangements, including those within the EAC. Equally important is the historical context of the EAC's formation, tracing the key actors and motivations that shaped East Africa's political, economic, and social landscape. This historical perspective highlights how past developments continue to influence regionalism and the challenges of collective security today.

The Rise of Pluralistic Security Communities

Scholars of international relations often avoid the term *community* when analysing international politics because of scepticism about whether actors truly share values, norms, and identities that enable long-term cooperation based on trust and reciprocity (Adler & Barnett, 1998). While anarchy is believed to drive states toward self-help, the concept of security communities challenges this assumption, proposing that stable peace can emerge through shared understanding (Deutsch et al., 1957).

The idea of pluralistic security communities, introduced by Van Wagenen in the 1950s and fully developed by Deutsch (1957), describes a group of states that maintains separate governments but establishes “dependable expectations of peaceful change” through shared values (Deutsch & Singer, 1964). The relevance of Deutsch’s insights remains strong today as states increasingly integrate social and economic factors into security policies, moving beyond traditional military concerns (Ashley, 1987).

Post-Cold War institutions such as NATO, ASEAN, and the OSCE have embraced the security community framework, emphasising the rule of law and regional stability as foundational principles. As international relations evolve, security communities remain a significant alternative to state-centric approaches, offering insights into how regions can foster lasting peace.

Colonial Foundations: The Historical Context of the East African Community Formation

The regionalisation of East Africa has been a continuous yet evolving process, shaped by colonial legacies, economic interdependencies, and political shifts. The East African High Commission (EAHC) (1948) and its successor, the East African Common Services Organisation (EACSO) (1961), were more than administrative conveniences under British rule—they established early regional economic coordination mechanisms (Gladden, 1963; Katembo, 2008). These institutions laid the groundwork for cross-border infrastructure, trade, and governance, preceding formal integration efforts by post-independence leaders. However, they also created economic asymmetries, with Kenya, particularly Nairobi, emerging as the dominant hub that later influenced the structure of the East African Community (EAC) (Kiapi, 1967; Katembo, 2008).

The 1967 Treaty for East African Cooperation marked a shift from colonial-era economic coordination to a politically driven regionalisation model, as post-independence leaders sought to transform British institutional legacies into a framework for regional self-determination (Kamanga, 2001). The selection of Arusha as the EAC headquarters aimed to address economic disparities inherited from colonial rule and create a more balanced structure (Katembo, 2008). However, the 1977 collapse of the first EAC highlighted the fragility of regionalisation when institutions lacked

effective governance, equitable benefit distribution, and strong dispute-resolution mechanisms (Huliaras & Kalantzakos, 2021; Roberts, 2014). The power struggle between Idi Amin and Julius Nyerere further illustrates how leadership conflicts and national interests can undermine collective decision-making and regional integration (Katembo, 2008).

Following the collapse of the first EAC, regionalisation efforts shifted toward bilateral and multilateral economic cooperation rather than a unified regional body. However, the revival of the EAC in the 1990s and its formal re-establishment in 2000 marked a renewed push for institutionalised regional integration through legal frameworks and structured decision-making (Mushimiyimana, 2016). Key milestones included the 1993 Permanent Tripartite Commission for Cooperation, which laid the groundwork for reintegration, followed by the 1998 draft treaty and the 1999 Treaty for the Establishment of the EAC signed by Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, which came into force on 7 July 2000 (*ibid.*). The 2007 inclusion of Rwanda and Burundi reflects an expansionist approach to regionalisation, where political stability and economic potential influence membership decisions.

The Current Dynamics in the East African Community

The EAC continues to face political, economic, and security challenges, threatening its unity and long-term viability. While the bloc, including Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia, has made progress in economic integration, it still struggles with political tensions, territorial disputes, and economic disparities. The prioritisation of trade and expansion over security concerns (Ogboye & Ochieng, 2024) has further strained regional cohesion, raising doubts about the EAC's ability to function as a unified entity.

Despite marking 25 years since its re-establishment, the EAC's role in political and security mediation has remained inconsistent. A key example is its attempt to mediate peace in eastern DRC, where a regional summit was weakened by the absence of Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi and the early departure of Rwandan President Paul Kagame (Mahashi, 2024). The summit's main outcome—an ambiguous call for regional and international peace efforts—highlighted the bloc's limited enforcement capacity. This inability to present a unified position on security issues underscores internal divisions and raises concerns about the EAC's capacity to maintain regional stability.

Relations among EAC member states remain contentious, with disputes disrupting regional cooperation. Tensions between Rwanda and the DRC have escalated, fuelled by accusations of cross-border aggression and support for armed groups (Global Conflict Tracker, 2025). Diplomatic relations between Rwanda and Uganda have been strained, with incidents of border closure and espionage allegations. Trade friction between Uganda and Kenya and diplomatic hostilities between Rwanda and Burundi hinder economic and security integration. Despite diplomatic efforts,

regional leaders struggle to find lasting solutions, and EAC institutions remain ineffective in enforcing agreements.

Political and ideological fragmentation within the EAC reflects the historical divisions that led to its collapse in 1977. The original EAC fell apart due to ideological differences between Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania over governance and economic policies. These tensions persist with Rwanda and Uganda under long-term leadership, while Kenya, Tanzania, and Burundi have experienced frequent leadership transitions. Yoweri Museveni has ruled Uganda since 1986, and Paul Kagame has led Rwanda since 2000 (de facto since 1994) (*ibid.*). In contrast, Kenya, Tanzania, and Burundi's leadership change foster different political cultures, making consensus-building difficult (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Despite a renewed push for regional integration in the 1990s, the EAC's transition from economic cooperation to security integration faces persistent obstacles. While economic collaboration benefits from structured institutions, efforts to build a collective security framework remain fragmented and frequently undermined by national interests (*ibid.*). As a result, the goal of a pluralistic security community remains aspirational. Deep-seated rivalries, territorial disputes, and conflicting security priorities hinder the feasibility of shared regional security strategies.

East Africa's security challenges stem from its postcolonial legacy, in which European-style state structures and economic models were imposed in an unsuitable context, leading to weak governance, corruption, and limited socioeconomic development. This has made regional security cooperation difficult, as states prioritise domestic stability over collective security efforts (Reno, 1998). Unlike some Asian nations that successfully adapted their governance models, East African states have remained fragile, often governed by kleptocratic regimes and warlords (*ibid.*).

Historically, the region lacked coherent security frameworks, with states addressing threats independently rather than through institutionalised cooperation. As a result, conflicts regularly spill over into neighbouring countries without a systematic regional response (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Until the late 1990s, East Africa remained highly fragmented, with minimal integration and weak ties to broader regional security frameworks. Unlike the Horn of Africa and Southern Africa, which developed structured security mechanisms, East Africa remained a frontier region in which postcolonial states struggled to establish cohesive security patterns (*ibid.*).

Moreover, the inclusion of conflict-affected states, such as the DRC and South Sudan, into the EAC without adequate stabilisation measures has further complicated regional security dynamics. The hurried expansion of the bloc, without ensuring that new members were institutionally prepared for integration, exacerbated existing conflicts rather than fostering stability. This has created a vicious cycle wherein the admission of conflict-affected countries heightens tensions within the bloc rather than promoting peace.

For instance, the admission of the DRC into the EAC did not include preconditions for internal stabilisation, meaning that the country's internal conflicts have now become regional conflicts within the bloc. The same occurred with South Sudan, which joined the EAC while still embroiled in internal strife. Instead of enhancing

the stability, these additions introduced further fragmentation, making it even more difficult for the EAC to function as a cohesive entity. This raises concerns about whether the EAC can effectively manage its growing security responsibilities or whether it will continue to struggle with internal divisions.

Signs of Progress: The Security Apparatus Indicator (Fragile State Index) Trends

Despite these challenges, progress has been made in security stabilisation across EAC member states. Data from the Security Apparatus Indicator (SAI) between 2006 and 2023 (The Fragile State Index) highlight varied trends in security improvements. Uganda's SAI score has improved from 8.5 in 2006 to 6.3 in 2023, indicating progress but persistent security challenges. Tanzania's SAI declined from 6.0 in 2006 to 4.6 in 2023, reflecting a strengthening of security infrastructure. Kenya's SAI remained relatively stable, fluctuating around 6.8, reflecting continued security concerns amidst political unrest and terrorist threats. Rwanda's SAI improved from above 6 to 5.2 in 2023, while Burundi's SAI dropped from 9.0 in 2016 to 7.8 in 2023, suggesting gradual security stabilisation but ongoing challenges (Fragile States Index)¹.

The SAI significantly influences the formation and stability of a regional security community within the EAC by determining each state's ability to contribute to collective security, coordinate responses to regional threats, and establish mutual trust among member states. Countries with higher SAI scores generally possess stronger security infrastructure, intelligence capabilities, and institutional frameworks, enabling them to project influence and take the lead in regional security efforts. Conversely, states with lower SAI scores often struggle with weak enforcement mechanisms, porous borders, and limited defence capacities, making them more dependent on regional cooperation while simultaneously distrusting stronger neighbours because of fear of external interference. These imbalances exacerbate security dependencies, create power asymmetries, and hinder the development of a unified security strategy within the EAC.

One of the greatest barriers to a regional security community is trust-building among EAC member states. The disparities in SAI scores create a lack of confidence among weaker states, which often fear external interference from stronger neighbours, while more militarily capable states remain reluctant to share intelligence and security resources. The absence of a unified approach to intelligence-sharing and joint security operations weakens the EAC's ability to respond collectively to emerging threats. Additionally, political tensions between key regional players, such as Rwanda and Uganda, and between Rwanda and the DRC, further undermine efforts to establish trust. Without confidence in one another's security commitments, states continue to prioritise unilateral actions over regional solutions, weakening the prospects of a pluralistic security community.

¹ <https://fragilestatesindex.org/excel/>

The spillover effects of security threats across porous borders exacerbate trust issues and complicate regional cooperation. The ability of insurgent groups and dissidents to operate across national frontiers, particularly in the DRC, poses a direct challenge to regional security. The failure of some states to secure their borders effectively has allowed transnational armed groups to operate with relative impunity, further destabilising neighbouring states. This has been especially evident in recurrent conflicts involving Rwanda, Uganda, and the DRC, where the inability to contain security threats within national borders has led to cross-border tensions and military interventions. The EAC's failure to develop a coordinated border security framework has perpetuated these challenges, making regional security cooperation highly fragmented and reactionary rather than proactive.

Institutional capacity is another critical determinant of the EAC's ability to develop a regional security framework. The EAC's security sector lacks the necessary institutional mechanisms to enforce regional security agreements, leading to policy inconsistencies and delayed responses to security crises. Furthermore, the heavy reliance on external funding for conflict prevention—96% of which comes from international partners such as the EU and GIZ—limits the bloc's ability to implement long-term security strategies (Kipkoech, 2010). This dependence on foreign donors weakens the regional ownership of security programs and exposes the EAC to external influences that may not align with internal security needs. Without strengthening financial autonomy and institutional capacity, the EAC will struggle to sustain a comprehensive and self-reliant security community.

Power asymmetries within the EAC complicate security integration, as states with stronger security infrastructures, such as Rwanda and Uganda, exert disproportionate influence, while weaker states, like Burundi and South Sudan, struggle to assert their interests. This imbalance fosters dependency rather than cooperation, making joint decision-making difficult. Stronger states often act unilaterally, as seen in Uganda and Rwanda's repeated interventions in the DRC, further undermining the legitimacy of collective security efforts. The absence of a balanced power-sharing mechanism for security governance hinders the formation of inclusive and equitable security structures within the EAC.

Difficulties in policy coordination have also emerged as major obstacles to regional security integration. The EAC comprises a mix of democratic and autocratic regimes, each with different security doctrines and governance styles. Some states rely on militarised crackdowns to address security challenges, whereas others prioritise diplomacy and conflict resolution. These ideological and policy differences prevent the formation of a standardised regional security framework, as there is no common agreement on the best approaches to handling security threats. Additionally, Tanzania's simultaneous membership in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) sometimes conflicts with EAC security priorities, particularly regarding its stance on the security dynamics in the DRC. These overlapping regional commitments have weakened the EAC's ability to maintain a unified position on security matters, further fragmenting regional security cooperation.

The Interplay Between Trade Relations and Regional Security in the EAC

While disparities in the Security Apparatus Indicator (Fragile State Index) highlight the challenges of establishing a cohesive and secure regional community, economic relations within the EAC offer both an opportunity and a potential risk for regional stability and security integration. Trade dependencies among EAC member states are not just economic phenomena but also political and security instruments that shape inter-state relations and influence regional security dynamics. The economic dependence of landlocked countries on Kenya and Tanzania, which have access to the sea, underscores the delicate balance between economic cooperation and potential conflicts.

The extent of trade interdependence among the EAC states influences regional security cooperation in several ways. Economic ties create incentives for stability, as disruptions in trade flows due to insecurity can lead to economic losses, motivating states to pursue diplomatic solutions to conflict. For instance, Uganda's exports to Kenya grew from USD 83.3 million in 2006 to USD 312 million in 2022, while Kenya's exports to Uganda increased from USD 402 million to USD 677 million over the same period, demonstrating a significant mutual economic reliance. This interdependence suggests that a security breakdown between these states would have direct economic repercussions, potentially pushing leaders to prioritise stability to protect trade interests. Similarly, while Kenya's exports to Rwanda surged from USD 83 million in 2006 to USD 439 million in 2022, Rwanda's exports to Kenya fluctuated, indicating a more asymmetric trade relationship that could create tensions if perceived as exploitative or inequitable.

However, economic interdependence does not always translate into harmonised security interests. Instead, it can exacerbate tensions, particularly when trade imbalances lead to economic grievances. Rwanda's fluctuating export values to Kenya, from a high of USD 127 million in 2008 to a low of USD 14 million in 2010, illustrate how economic volatility can reinforce perceptions of inequality and marginalisation, potentially feeding into diplomatic disputes. Likewise, Burundi's weaker trade link with Kenya and stronger dependence on Tanzania—where imports grew from USD 29.3 million to USD 145 million—suggests that its economic priorities are more aligned with Tanzania than Kenya, affecting how it positions itself in regional security debates.

Additionally, economic dependencies can serve as leverage in security negotiations or can even be weaponised during political disputes. Uganda's growing import dependence on Tanzania (from USD 42 million in 2006 to USD 834 million in 2022) highlights how trade relations can shape security alliances. If Tanzania were to limit Uganda's access to key imports during a diplomatic standoff, it could exert political pressure. Similarly, Kenya's dominance as a transit hub for Ugandan and Rwandan exports has considerable influence in shaping regional policies, including security frameworks.

The connection between trade and security is particularly evident in border security issues, where economic disruptions can trigger instability. The frequent border closures between Rwanda and Uganda, despite their strong economic ties, illustrate how unresolved security disputes can directly impact trade flows and regional stability. Trade corridors also present security risks because poorly secured borders facilitate illicit trade, arms trafficking, and smuggling, which can finance insurgent groups and exacerbate regional conflicts.

To ensure that economic integration reinforces rather than undermines regional security, the EAC must adopt policies that explicitly link trade and security cooperation. This includes harmonising customs regulations, improving cross-border security cooperation, and ensuring that trade imbalances do not escalate into political tension. Without these safeguards, economic interdependence could become a source of friction rather than a stabilising force in regional security efforts. Thus, while trade within the EAC fosters mutual economic reliance, its role in shaping security cooperation remains both an opportunity and a challenge for developing a cohesive regional security community.

Conclusion

The development of a pluralistic security community within the EAC remains a work in progress that is influenced by both internal and external factors. Security concerns often lead states to prioritise sovereignty over collective action, limiting trust and intelligence sharing. Economic interdependence, particularly through trade relations, presents an opportunity for stronger regional cooperation. With their strategic access to the sea, Kenya and Tanzania serve as vital economic hubs, reinforcing the idea that regional stability and security can be strengthened through economic ties. However, commitment to regional institutions remains uneven, with some states, such as Tanzania, balancing their involvement in the EAC with other regional blocs like SADC.

In an increasingly multipolar world, regional organisations have proven to be more effective than individual nation-states in addressing complex security and governance challenges. Although the UN has shown a desire to work with regional and sub-regional bodies, the initial dependence on the global North States and organisations tends to bring only short-term respite in conflicts (Sempijja, 2016). In contrast, when empowered, regional organisations can play a decisive role in conflict resolution, as seen in IGAD's mediation efforts in South Sudan. This suggests that regions can serve as stabilising forces in global governance, thus reducing dependency on external actors.

However, regionalism also presents certain risks. If dominated by a few powerful states, regional blocs may become exclusive spheres of influence rather than inclusive governance platforms. To avoid this, the EAC must enhance institutional trust, align economic integration with security cooperation, and ensure balanced decision-making among its members. A well-functioning regional community can act as a

building block for a more stable world order, proving that when effectively structured, regionalism is a key pillar in global governance.

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Essay 30: ASEAN Security Community Building: Theory and Practice



Jamie E. Pring and Raymund Jose G. Quilop

Introduction

ASEAN's evolution has inspired and enriched conceptual developments in regionalism. At the same time, due to its close relations with Southeast Asian regionalism scholars, ASEAN's institutional growth has also been informed by academics and experts who have actively employed regionalism concepts to help guide the development of the politico-security, economic, and socio-cultural pillars of the ASEAN community.

In his seminal 2001 book, Amitav Acharya employed the concept of the security community to analyse ASEAN regionalism over the years. Developed by Karl Deutsch et al. (1957) and with a deepened constructivist dimension by Emmanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (1998), a security community is an integrated group that has attained a sense of community (or *we-feeling*) embodied by sufficiently strong and widespread formal and informal institutions or practices that “assure peaceful change among members of a group with ‘reasonable’ certainty over a ‘long period of time’” (Acharya, 2001, p. 16, citing Deutsch, 1961, p. 98). The absence of both war and the preparation for war against the other members is a fundamental element of security communities. With this concept in mind, ASEAN regionalism was examined as a process of building a pluralistic security community, a subset of security communities where members retain their independence, or a “transnational region comprised of

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_30

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sovereign states whose people maintain dependable expectations of peaceful change” (Adler & Barnett, 1998, p. 30). The concept has captured ASEAN’s emphasis on norm-building over the years and its challenges with expanding its membership and upholding ASEAN norms in a rapidly changing Asia-Pacific peace and security environment.

With the rise and plurality of new concepts and frameworks in regionalism studies and comparative regionalism over the years, how relevant is the security community concept in current debates and analysis on ASEAN today?

In four steps, we aim to illustrate how the concept of the security community, a keystone in regionalism studies, remains an essential conceptual framework for understanding ASEAN’s community-building process. Furthermore, we posit that its application in the ASEAN context provides lush grounds for the concept’s further theoretical development. First, we discuss how security communities encapsulate the process, progress, and trajectory of ASEAN’s peace and security community-building efforts thus far. Second, we explain that analysing ASEAN as a security community showcases the concept’s strengths and limitations. Third, we reflect on how the ASEAN experience can help identify ways to enhance the concept of the security community. Fourth, we explore how the concept can also help chart the future of ASEAN security community-building.

ASEAN as a Security Community? Process, Progress, and Trajectory of ASEAN’S Security Community-Building Efforts

ASEAN documents and declarations do not directly employ the term *security community* but refer to a *politico-security community* that aspires to a more comprehensive approach to peace within the region, as will be discussed in the second section. Nevertheless, the processes within ASEAN, its progress throughout the years, and the declared goals are in line with the security community concept more consistently than other concepts, particularly security regimes, which have been a contending framework for understanding the organisation (Collins, 2007). The core element of security regimes is the prominence of self-interest among members in pursuing their goals within an anarchical environment (Bellamy, 2004). Indeed, ASEAN Member States have been clear about the importance of respect for state sovereignty, and ASEAN’s consensus-building processes ensure that the regional organisation progresses without undermining members’ core national interests. However, as the ASEAN experience shows, the pursuit of member states’ national interests can co-exist with the absence of expectations and preparations for war against one another. As such, while the security regime concept could describe ASEAN’s early years, ASEAN’s current activities, its member states’ present actions within the organisation, and its overall trajectory are better described as a process of building a security community.

ASEAN's institution-building, dialogue, practical cooperation, sectoral collaboration, and many other activities align with the security community concept, specifically in building and inculcating norms that promote expectations of peaceful change and decrease the likelihood of war among member states. ASEAN's norm-building is grounded on the understanding that member states' long-term interests, peace, and prosperity are intertwined and that specific national interests can be pursued peacefully within the normative framework of the *ASEAN Way*.

In particular, the recent developments of defence and security platforms within ASEAN attest to the growing confidence levels among member states in working on matters of vital national interests within the ASEAN normative framework. While consistent with Acharya's analysis that multilateral defence cooperation does not envision an ASEAN military pact, the region has nevertheless witnessed a deepening of defence and security ties. Most notably, the establishment of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), the ADMM-Plus, the ADMM-Plus Expert Working Groups (EWGs), and the exercises and defence officials dialogue under the ambit of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which is a foreign affairs-led dialogue platform, all realise what was unimaginable more than 50 years ago, gathering top defence and military officials within the ASEAN umbrella. These newer mechanisms, particularly the ADMM-Plus, provide a space for dialogue and practical cooperation among the militaries of ASEAN and its dialogue partners, comprised of major powers holding the world's largest and most advanced militaries. Creating such space is a product of decades of continued dialogue and confidence-building activities among foreign and defence ministries of ASEAN member states and major powers that foster familiarity and ensure that each participating country adheres to the fundamental treaties within ASEAN (Quilop, 2017), cultivating shared expectations of peaceful change.

Moreover, ASEAN member-states also exhibit behaviour consistent with membership in a security community concept in that they follow ASEAN norms not exclusively to pursue their own national interest at the possible expense of other members' welfare (following the logic of consequences consistent with security regimes). Instead, member states follow ASEAN norms even at a point where they set aside their differences or mutually resort to peaceful means to resolve the conflict. In 2011, despite increasing tensions between Cambodia and Thailand at that time on the disputed territorial ownership of the area surrounding the Preah Vihear temple, the then ASEAN Chair, Indonesia, kept the space for dialogue between the defence ministers of Cambodia and Thailand at the sidelines of the 2011 ADMM (Quilop, 2017). The two countries eventually resorted to the International Court of Justice to arbitrate. Hence, despite outside criticisms of inefficiency, ASEAN mechanisms have enabled member states to continue to dialogue and cooperate with one another amidst mounting tensions. Focusing on areas of common interest rather than specific national issues, once participating in ASEAN's various fora, member states show norm compliance based on the logic of appropriateness, in that they believe these norms should be upheld for their inherent merits despite possible contradiction with member-state interests.

While ASEAN's security community-building is still a work in progress, as will be shown in the next sections, ASEAN's current activities help ensure that the likelihood

of an all-out war among the ten member-states decreases over time and that there is a growing shared expectation of peaceful change, consistent with the security community concept.

What Is the Conceptual Value Added in Classifying ASEAN as a Security Community? Strengths and Limitations of the Concept

ASEAN's security community-building experience demonstrates the strengths and limitations of the security community concept and enriches the conceptualisation of security. In terms of strengths, seeing ASEAN as a security community illustrates that a diverse set of members can adopt expectations of peaceful change. Altogether, the ten ASEAN member-states vary widely in terms of systems of government, culture, relations with global powers, and historical experiences.

Despite the variety, all member states continue to expand ASEAN's scope to cover new areas of cooperation. After all, the security community concept does not preclude diversity *per se* or the absence of conflicts of interest, and several member states even have conflicting national interests. What is crucial is that these members do not resort to war to settle such differences but to pacific mechanisms to foster the conflict's resolution, such as dialogue, arbitration, cooperative governance frameworks, and confidence-building measures to promote mutual understanding and collaboration in such areas.

Regarding the concept's limitations, ASEAN's security community-building experience shows that cultivating such expectations of peaceful change among a diverse set of members is a long-term commitment that has entailed challenges in achieving more immediate peace and security goals. While the principle of non-intervention helped foster peace inter-state, the processes that observe this principle entail time and discrete approaches that, unfortunately, currently generate challenges in immediately assisting in peace *within* states. In Myanmar, the same principle has impeded ASEAN's ability to immediately and directly assist in the humanitarian crisis involving the Rohingyas (Yuan & Lee, 2023).

In terms of enriching the concept of security communities, the ASEAN experience also points to a much broader definition of security beyond making the option of war unthinkable, but a comprehensive and human-centred idea of security that embraces the inter-relationship between economic, socio-cultural, and political dimensions of security. Before human security became a buzzword at the international level, ASEAN had long prioritised a human security approach when promoting a security community (Caballero-Anthony, 2004). This is manifested in two ways. First, the belief that regional security community-building will be best achieved through the close partnership between political officers and the defence sector grounds the intense engagement of both foreign affairs and defence officials in the politico-security pillar

of the ASEAN community. As the defence sector develops peaceful working relationships within, the political level's leadership in broader issues ensures that peaceful norms and habits of cooperation are mainstreamed into other sectors of government.

Second, one of ASEAN's aspirations in promoting socio-cultural and economic cooperation in the region is that, in fostering citizens' stability and prosperity in these dimensions, the structural causes of war and suffering are alleviated, and violent conflict is avoided. Hence, the three pillars of the ASEAN community, namely, the politico-security, economic, and socio-cultural pillars, are meant to reinforce one another in providing ASEAN citizens with a safe and healthy environment where they can work together with their governments in promoting regional peace, security, and prosperity.

How Can ASEAN'S Current Challenges Help Develop the Concept of Security Communities? Charting the Concept's Further Conceptual Development

While ASEAN has relatively firmly established dependable expectations of peaceful change among its members, old and new, the future of ASEAN's security-community building will also test the effectiveness of a security community to promote its norms among its external partners, especially cultivating the expectations of peaceful change among significantly more powerful actors such as China, Russia, and the United States. The increasing tensions in the South China Sea are also an important litmus test of its external partners' adherence to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), ASEAN's ability to protect the principles enshrined in the treaty, and the ability of security communities to expand further.

As the global peace and security landscape rapidly evolves, ASEAN's security community also progressively interacts with other groupings in the Asia-Pacific, ranging from bilateral treaty alliances to trade and security regimes. Even within the ASEAN framework, challenges arise between the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ADMM mechanisms (Quilop, 2017). While following Acharya, bilateralism remains a prominent configuration in defence cooperation, and tripartite exercises, meetings, and evolving ADMM mechanisms have also emerged. These developments could enrich further conceptualisation of the security community concept, particularly its role amidst increasing regime complexity.

Using the Security Community Concept as a Framework, how Do we Foresee the Future of ASEAN Security Community Building? Exploring ASEAN'S Way Ahead

The concept of security communities can help chart ASEAN's future direction, and several developments in the organisation already show signs of movement toward it. One direction is strengthening processes of fostering peaceful change within its member states. In this regard, ASEAN has taken a more forward stance on liaising with member states while maintaining peaceful relations. ASEAN's attempts at facilitating the resolution of the conflict involving the Rohingyas (Yuan & Lee, 2023), as well as the overall situation in Myanmar, illustrate that firmer and more open dialogue on intrastate human security is possible within the umbrella of a community that has long resorted to discrete approaches to maintain peaceful expectations of change. Meanwhile, its combination of quiet diplomacy and, at the same time, limitations on the Myanmar military junta in ASEAN activities illustrates ASEAN's balancing act of respecting sovereignty and developing a firmer role to facilitate progress towards peace.

Another direction is that the future of the ASEAN security community could also witness the growing connectedness of non-governmental actors working towards regional peace and security, a milestone towards a security community (Collins, 2007). In addition to its long-standing relationship with key epistemic communities in the region, comprised of academics and scholar-practitioners, ASEAN has fostered enhanced interactions among its member states' citizens through tourism and economic, cultural, and educational exchanges that have intensified in the past decades. Hence, following the security community concept, the growing connectedness of these groups and individuals can cultivate partnerships that work alongside governments in fully realising human-centred security in the region.

Conclusion

The security community concept continues to serve as a fundamental reference point in understanding ASEAN's present and exploring its future. While it continues to safeguard member states' interests, ASEAN has moved beyond merely an arena where member states pursue particularistic national interests into an organisation and a Community that inculcates peaceful norms among its members and external partners. Such a move remains incomplete, and challenges towards a more comprehensive peace and security continue to be insurmountable due to the very principles that brought its members peacefully together. The ASEAN experience also shows that cultivating expectations of peaceful change is possible among a diverse set of members, but the cultivation is tedious and can have numerous setbacks. The ASEAN experience also points to the need for the security community concept to elaborate on broader definitions of security, detail processes of security community expansion,

and better interface with other concepts such as regime complexity. Reciprocally, the security community concept encourages strengthening ASEAN approaches to ensure peaceful change within member states and bridge-building activities among citizens and non-government actors as the way forward for a more integrated security community.

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Essay 31: How Can (Neo) Functionalism Contribute to the Study of Latin American Regionalism?



Detlef Nolte and Brigitte Weiffen

Introduction

Functionalism and neofunctionalism are theoretical approaches that were developed several decades ago with a view to the integration processes in Europe and were later also applied to Latin America. Haas (1967) and Schmitter (1970a) analysed the Latin American integration processes of the 1960s from a neofunctionalist perspective (see also Haas & Schmitter, 1964); four decades later, Malamud and Schmitter (2011) did the same for the integration processes of the 1990s. Based on the European experience, they transferred neofunctionalist approaches to Latin America with the aim of looking for conditions that drive and deepen integration processes. But, above all, these past applications revealed the limits of Latin American regionalism. While spillover was the engine of European integration, Latin American Regional Organisations (ROs) did not experience a spillover of functional cooperation into new areas nor a deepening of regional integration through the creation and strengthening of supranational institutions. Instead, they have gone through seemingly endless cycles of crisis and resilience. The most recent cycle of crises began in the mid-2010s and culminated in the disintegration of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the paralysis of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), both the result of excessive political polarisation among member governments that made regional cooperation difficult.

Against this background, the question arises as to why (neo)functionalist approaches should continue to be used to analyse Latin American regionalism. This think-piece argues that, on the one hand, a new reading of the texts of neofunctionalist

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_31

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authors can help to explain the resilience of ROs in Latin America. On the other hand, given the current crisis of Latin American regionalism, a functionalist perspective can help to improve the resilience of ROs in the future.

Neofunctionalism and the Resilience of Latin American Regionalism

The neofunctionalist studies by Haas, Schmitter and Malamud have shown that the regional integration processes in Latin America did not follow a spillover logic. However, regionalism has flourished in Latin America and has shown a surprising resilience, with ROs successfully weathering periods of stress and crisis (Agostinis & Nolte, 2023; Nolte & Weiffen, 2021). In an influential and provocative article, Malamud and Gardini (2012, p. 125) asked whether regionalism had peaked in Latin America. They answered, “Latin American regionalism is ... rolling onto itself, either spilling around without deepening or going back to standard cooperation arrangements.”

While spillover is the buzzword of neofunctionalism to explain progress in regional integration, proponents of the neofunctionalist approach admit that spillover is not the most likely path for regional integration projects. In a seminal article, Schmitter (1970b, p. 847) argued that “the highest probability is that in any decisional cycle, the actors will opt for encapsulation”. Encapsulation, i.e. the maintenance of the status quo, is thus an alternative to the progressive development (in the sense of *spillover*) of ROs and could explain their resilience. And neofunctionalist authors offer even more alternatives. In his analysis of the Central American Common Market, Schmitter (1970a, p. 39) developed and introduced the concept of *spill-around*, “characterised by a proliferation of independent efforts at regional coordination in distinctive functional spheres—i.e., an expansion in the scope of regional tasks—without, however, a concomitant devolution of authority to a single collective body—i.e., an increase in the level of regional decision-making.” Both encapsulation and spill-around can explain the resilience of ROs. However, this is also the case with another alternative, *spillback*, which, according to Schmitter (1970b, p. 844–846), refers to a contraction of both the scope and level of regional commitment and authority. It is not apparent in Schmitter’s scheme where he would place withdrawal (such as Chile from the Andean Pact in 1976) or expulsion/suspension (such as Venezuela from the Common Market of the South, Mercosur, in 2017) of a member from an RO. It can be argued that this is a special form of spill-back. The loss of a member reduces the decision-making power of the RO (fewer states are subject to a common authority), and the subject areas (or mandates) covered have a smaller (territorial) scope. As empirical experience (and the literature on the death of international organisations) shows, there is a risk that a spill-back in the form of withdrawal can lead to the disintegration of an RO (as in the case of UNASUR).

However, the analysis of crises in Latin American ROs where their survival was at stake shows that they proved to be surprisingly resilient, with the disintegration of UNASUR representing an exception (Agostinis & Nolte, 2023). In crisis constellations, the alternatives to spillover that neofunctionalism presents as second-best outcomes, namely encapsulation and spill-around (and even spillback), may become strategic options to ensure the continued existence of an RO. These second-best outcomes may account for the resilience of Latin American regionalism and the ability of ROs to survive in Latin America despite adverse conditions (Nolte & Weiffen, 2025).

ROs can progress, stagnate, retrocede, or be abandoned. Spillover, spill-around, encapsulation and spillback are mechanisms that contribute to these outcomes. However, the contribution of each may vary, as illustrated by Table 1. From a neofunctionalist perspective, only spillovers imply progress in the development of ROs. However, in a crisis, spillover may not be viable. Therefore, in such a context, spill-around, encapsulation or spill-back may be the best option to prevent the abandonment of ROs. In addition, spill-around can also result in progression by moving an RO beyond stagnation. Stagnation in one cooperation sector can be offset by a new cooperation initiative in another sector. Through spill-around, regional cooperation continues as the RO expands its mandate into new policy fields, which, in the long run, can lead to a deepening of regional integration. An example of this would be the stagnation of trade issues within Mercosur in the early 2000s and the promotion of the so-called Social Mercosur, which reached out to new issues. But spill-around can also symbolise the stagnation or retrocession of ROs. In this case, regional cooperation is declaratively extended to new policy fields (declaratory regionalism, cf. Jenne et al., 2017) without concrete progress or involvement of member states. This may weaken support for regional integration in the long run.

Encapsulation generally means stagnation of ROs. At best, it keeps them alive under adverse conditions. This was the case with the Andean Community and the Central American Common Market from the mid-1970s to the 1990s. However, encapsulation carries the risk that a RO loses substance and becomes hollow. In extreme cases, ROs become zombie organisations (Gray, 2018). Spillback usually leads to stagnation or retrocession, and, in the worst case, to the abandonment of the RO, but under certain conditions it can also lead to progression. For example, the withdrawal or expulsion of members from an RO can facilitate cooperation among the remaining members, and a reduction in tasks (mandates) can help to better manage

Table 1 Development of Regional Organisations

	Progression	Stagnation	Retrocession	Abandonment
Spillover	x			
Spill-around	x	x	x	
Encapsulation		x		
Spillback	(x)	x	x	(x)

Source Nolte and Weiffen (2024)

the remaining tasks. One can speculate about what would have happened to Mercosur if Venezuela's membership had not been suspended.

Functionalism and the Crisis of Latin American Regionalism

Given the politically induced setbacks to regional cooperation since the mid-2010s, Latin American scholars such as Actis and Malacalza (2021) and Tussie (2021) have proposed following a more technical, sectoral and pragmatic approach ("technical-scientific cooperative multilateralism"; cf. Rodrigues & Kleiman, 2020) with the aim of better insulating ROs from the spill-over of political conflicts. From a broader perspective that goes beyond Latin America, this approach can be situated in a tradition of political thinking about international cooperation that can be summarised under the analytical concept of "technocratic internationalism", which refers to a programmatic intellectual attitude that combines cross-border cooperation and expert governance (Steffek, 2021, p. 16). The goal of this school of thought (to which David Mitrany belongs) is to bring political and social issues that require international cooperation into the realm of administrative decision-making, where they can be given a technical solution. This would lead to sectoral and functional cooperation that transcends national borders.

In an interesting article, Breslin and Wilson (2015) proposed to apply a functionalist approach to the study of Asian regionalism, introducing the concept of "functional regional collaboration," and they explicitly refer to the work of David Mitrany. It should be noted that Mitrany never claimed to have developed a functionalist theory. For him, it was a "functionalist idea" or a "functionalist approach" (Mitrany, 1948, p. 354). While neofunctionalist approaches have already travelled across the Atlantic, with the results mentioned above, functionalism in its original version, dating back to David Mitrany, has not yet been applied to Latin American integration. However, a functionalist approach could make an interesting contribution to the current debate on how to prevent the spillover of political conflict into functional cooperation. Latin American regionalism is characterised by the reluctance to cede sovereignty and to create strong regional institutions. It has also been characterised as inter-presidential (Malamud, 2003), and the ideological affinities and the (often personal) conflicts between presidents have a direct impact on the progress and setbacks of regional projects.

A functionalist logic is no stranger to Latin American regionalism. Before the crisis of UNASUR began, Riggiozzi and Grugel (2015, p. 796) described it as a regional governance project with "a preference within it for creating a team of professional specialists to take charge of a policy area rather than having politicians making grand (and unrealistic) statements of policy intent." In fact, one of UNASUR's strengths was the flexible collaboration between member countries within the sectoral councils (for example, the South American Health Council). The sectoral councils operated in different ways, but they contributed to the formation of transnational

policy networks. Ultimately, it was a functionally differentiated pattern of cooperation. A comparison of the functioning of different sectoral councils shows that group cohesion was more likely to develop in clearly defined policy areas. A shared technical rationality among policymakers in specific areas facilitated cooperation based on technical arguments. In contrast, the involvement of political officials and the ideological directives of governments acted as major impediments to independent sectoral work (Hoffmann, 2019). David Mitrany would have been delighted with these results.

Unfortunately, however, the functionally differentiated cooperation in UNASUR's sectoral councils was interrupted when the central political decision-making bodies were paralysed by political-ideological conflicts between the presidents. The fact that inter-presidential conflicts can have a negative impact on regional cooperation was paradigmatically demonstrated when the blockade of decision-making at the presidential level also led to a blockade of the work of the sectoral councils, for example, in the areas of health and infrastructure. When six presidents declared their countries' withdrawal, the sectoral (or functional) cooperation, which had been quite successful in some areas, also came to an end.

It seems that in times of crisis in policy areas that affect more than one country in a region, the need for functional-technical cooperation increases. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some authors expressed the expectation that health could become the engine of renewed regional cooperation in Latin America. Although this expectation was only partially fulfilled, the COVID-19 crisis demonstrated that ROs with a stronger technical orientation and a certain degree of decision-making autonomy for their bureaucracies responded better to the challenges of the pandemic than other organisations (Ruano & Saltalamacchia, 2021). When the Mexican government revitalised CELAC during its 2020–2021 pro tempore presidency, it initially focused on increasing technical cooperation by incorporating new issues such as the pandemic. Ruano and Saltalamacchia (2021, pp. 107, 105) even argue that CELAC was “saved by functionalism” because “the functional demand to address the pandemic did work as an incentive for relaunching cooperation within this dying mechanism.”

What are the ideas that a functionalist approach can contribute to the current debate on the problems and challenges of regionalism in Latin America? First, it offers an alternative to political integration projects and the experiences of their failure and stalemate. Second, a functional approach does not interfere with sovereignty, which is a critical issue in Latin American regionalism. In this regard, *functional regions* (Breslin & Wilson, 2015) may be a better and more efficient option. Third, a functionalist approach also assumes that functional or technical organisations need a certain degree of autonomy in decision-making.

Fourth, functional regional architecture is more flexible and stable in times of political crisis. Mitrany's reflections from 1948 (pp. 357–358) can be well applied to today's Latin America: “Functional schemes are at best complementary, each helping the others, and at worst independent of each other. Anyone can start at any time, whether the others are accepted or not, and anyone may live and prosper even if others fail or are abandoned. In such changing times, they have the invaluable virtue of autonomous existence, and likewise of autonomous development. A scheme started

by a few countries for transport, or for oil, and so on, could later be broadened to include belated members, or reduced to let reluctant ones drop out. Moreover, they can vary in their membership; countries could take part in some schemes and perhaps not in others, whereas in any political arrangement, such divided choice would obviously not be tolerable. Functional ‘neutrality’ is possible, where political ‘neutrality’ is not.”

Fifth, a functionalist approach could help overcome political conflicts by emphasising common needs that transcend national boundaries. For Mitrany (1948, p. 359), the functionalist approach implies “a change of political outlook. It should help to shift the emphasis from political issues which divide, to those social issues in which the interest of the peoples is plainly akin and collective; to shift the emphasis from power to problem and purpose.”

Finally, a functionalist approach is consistent with the critical view of presidential conflicts as a cause of the crisis of regionalism. Breslin and Wilson (2015, p. 139) claim that “on a normative level, Mitrany thought that politics and politicians were too often the problem rather than the solution.” Therefore, his proposed solution was to give technocrats, rather than politicians, the task of finding and implementing technical solutions to transnational problems and to shield them to some extent from political interference.

In contrast to Europe, where the role of technocrats with some decision-making autonomy in the EU (*the bureaucracy in Brussels*) is often viewed critically from different perspectives on the left and right, in Latin America, there currently seems to be a more positive view of apolitical and technocratic cooperation. This reflects the different experiences of the two regions. In Europe, the EU bureaucracy plays an important role in the integration process. Its decisions affect the daily lives of citizens, and for its critics on both the right and the left of the political spectrum, the expansion of technocratic policymaking at the international level comes at the expense of popular sovereignty and democratic self-determination. In Latin America, political conflicts have hindered the progress of integration processes. In this sense, depoliticisation and a greater role for technocrats seem an attractive alternative.

The positive view of technical cooperation from a functionalist perspective corresponds to the hopes that, as mentioned above, have recently been placed in a *technical-scientific multilateralism* in Latin American regionalism. A more technical approach to regional cooperation would also strengthen the role of development banks such as the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (CAF) or the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) as “orchestrators” (Palestini, 2024) of regional initiatives. Such a technical approach may facilitate cooperation between ideologically opposed governments in certain policy areas, but it excludes other politically sensitive areas (such as the protection of human rights and democracy). Moreover, many issues that appear technical have political and ideological underpinnings.

There is some ambivalence about the role of technocrats in Mitrany’s writings, which, on the one hand, gives the impression that technocrats act freely and control themselves, what Mitrany (1948, p. 358) called “technical self-determination.” On the other hand, in another writing, Mitrany (1965, p. 140; see also Hammarlund, 2005, p. 128) introduces the interesting concept of a “functional constituency” for

technocrats, and he also mentions NGOs as part of it. However, even a functional constituency poses problems because it is limited and does not include all citizens. At the same time, this points to the tension between citizen participation and technocratic decision-making. In a broader sense, the question is how to reconcile more autonomy for technocrats with more participation and how to create new channels of participation (such as *functional constituencies*) at the same time.

Conclusion and Outlook

As Malamud has pointed out regarding the development of Mercosur, presidents (or presidential diplomacy), rather than the spillover effect, have driven integration processes. However, presidents have also proven to be an obstacle and a disruptive factor for regional integration and cooperation. While “presidential-driven integration” (Malamud, 2005, p. 159) helped to break the neofunctionalist impasse in Latin America, a functionalist approach can help to mitigate the risks associated with “inter-presidential integration” (Malamud, 2003, p. 216) and the political spillover from inter-presidential conflicts to sectoral-functional cooperation.

A functionalist approach seeks to transcend the boundaries of the nation-state when it comes to cooperation on practical issues that require transnational cooperation and regulation. A functional-technical approach aims to shield cooperation from political influence and the spillover of politically motivated conflicts. Due to its context of origin, the experience of the excesses of nationalism in Europe and two world wars, the functionalist approach has a strong anti-nationalist and anti-ideological component. This may explain its appeal in times of political polarisation between governments in a region and strong sovereigntist reservations by governments that hinder regional cooperation on issues of importance to citizens.

However, functionalist sectoral regional integration is neither an automatism nor a silver bullet to solve all the problems of Latin American regionalism. At a time when scientific knowledge is being questioned, technical issues are easily politicised. There could also be a backlash against an overly independent and apolitical orientation of such technical bodies. Steffek (2021, p. 179) succinctly sums up a seemingly contradictory attitude: “There is little confidence that technocrats will solve our problems, and, indeed, there is a persistent fear that they may come to patronise us. On the other hand, creating expert bureaucracies remains the standard answer whenever a new problem enters the political agenda.”

Moreover, presidents will continue to play a central role in Latin American integration processes. However, against the backdrop of the crisis-ridden development of regional organisations (as in the case of UNASUR), it is hoped that Latin American presidents will give more space to technical-functional cooperation structured in such a way as to reduce the risk of a negative spillover of political conflicts unrelated to the issue of functional cooperation. There are some signs that regional cooperation in Latin America may be moving in this direction. For example, the revival of CELAC

was achieved by focusing on functional cooperation in specific policy areas (such as the response to the COVID-19 pandemic).

Similarly, the so-called “Consensus of Brasília”, a document issued after a meeting of South American presidents in May 2023, gives much room to functional cooperation. The presidents agreed “to promptly promote South American cooperation initiatives ... in areas that concern the immediate needs of citizens such as health, food security, food systems based on traditional agriculture, the environment, water resources, natural disasters, infrastructure and logistics, energy interconnection and clean energy, digital transformation, defence, border integration and security, and cybersecurity” (Brazil, 2023; translation by the authors). The subsequently adopted “Roadmap for South American Integration” proposes “prioritising concrete initiatives that have a positive impact on the living conditions of the population and that do not duplicate efforts already underway in other cooperation mechanisms” (Chile, 2023; translation by the authors). It also proposes strengthening dialogue in specific areas and establishing a calendar of sectoral meetings.

Latin American regionalism has many facets and should be analysed from different perspectives. Neofunctionalist and functionalist approaches can help explain its resilience in the past and improve its resilience in the future. Moreover, the epistemological community of scholars who study Latin American regionalism can help give *functionalist* ideas greater political resonance.

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Essay 32: From Europe to Latin America: Lessons in Mainstream Theorising for Regional Disintegration



María Victoria Alvarez

Introduction

Regional integration and cooperation have generally advanced in virtuous cycles. Nevertheless, these cycles have occasionally faced disruptions. Recent regionalism crises in both the European Union (EU) and Latin America and the Caribbean¹ differ significantly from earlier ones and present unprecedented challenges for scholars. Of course, disintegration could be just one of several possible outcomes of crises.²

“Theories of regional integration or, more specifically, of European integration have largely focused on just that: integration, not *disintegration*” (italics in original) (Vollaard, 2018, p. 3).³ EU theories were well-suited to map the integration process, but fell short when faced with the new terrain of existential crises like the euro crisis or Brexit. However, as Schmitter (2004, p. 49) claims, “[a]ny comprehensive theory of integration should potentially be a theory of disintegration.”

In Latin America, regional integration is not a singular, streamlined phenomenon but rather—as a result of successive institution-building waves—a rich web of various organisations with different objectives, memberships, and areas of focus. The post-liberal wave of regionalism, which emphasised social inclusion, state-led development, and reduced dependence on traditional Western powers, lost momentum and encountered fragmentation and even the collapse of some of its innovative frameworks.

¹ Hereafter referred to only as Latin America.

² For an illuminating examination of regional disintegration, see *Comentario Internacional*, special issue 21, especially its insightful presentation (De Lombaerde et al., 2023).

³ It is not possible here to comprehensively review all the significant contributions to research on EU crises. For a thorough assessment, see Riddervold et al. (2021) and Brack & Gürkan (2021).

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We can ask, is it feasible to compare potential disintegration in both the EU and Latin America? Moreover, is there value for Latin America in mainstream European theories on regional disintegration? We set out to tackle these questions with the understanding that “non-integration and disintegration are phenomena that can be grasped by theories developed to understand European integration. The EU may be leading the way once again—this time only backwards” (Malamud, 2012, p. 186).

At its core, comparative regionalism struggles with three interconnected challenges: the dominance of European studies and theories, the polysemic and multifaceted nature of its object of study, and the inherent diversity of regionalism. The evolution of EU theories mirrors Europe’s own diversity, which has led to a more multiform and complex understanding of the concept of regionalism. The diversity of regional experiences also contributes to the polysemic concept of regionalism, as different regions interpret and practice regionalism in varied ways. However, this diversity is often overshadowed by the dominance of EU-centred theories, which have set the standards for what is considered regionalism.

This short essay seeks to explore the relevance of mainstream European theories for understanding regional dynamics beyond Europe, with a focus on disintegration. It explores the applicability of these theories in the Latin American context. After this introduction, the essay briefly assesses some of the *interactions* between Europe and Latin America on regionalism, then concisely examines the previously mentioned challenges, and finally explores the prospects of European theorisation to inform Latin American regionalism in its recent crises and potential disintegration.

Brief Assessment of the *Interactions* Between European and Latin American Regionalism Theorists and Theories

Latin American scholars have engaged with European theories on regionalism, particularly during the heyday of closed regionalism. For a few decades, there was a two-way exchange of ideas. EU studies emerged from the efforts of intellectuals who used the European case as a basis to develop a general theory of regional integration. Comparative regionalism arrived in Latin America through the impulse of these very same neofunctionalist scholars, such as E. Haas and P. Schmitter, who first developed grand theories of the integration process in Europe (Warleigh-Lack & Rosamond, 2010).

Neofunctionalism emerged to capture the unique dynamics of European integration, focusing on the spillover effects, the role of supranational institutions and the gradual transfer of sovereignty from national to regional levels. A few years earlier, economist Raúl Prebisch championed regional integration as an important

step towards autonomous development in Latin America.⁴ It has been argued that Prebisch was inspired by the neofunctionalist literature on European integration (Moncayo et al., 2011, pp. 364–365) for his initial and positive assessment of the institutionalisation of the Andean Group (Prebisch, 1973, pp. 34–35). However, this is not the case. The case is that Prebisch was not enthusiastic about the idea of supra-nationality present in the European experience (Briceño Ruiz & De Lombaerde, 2018).

To be fair, neofunctionalism was the only mainstream theory that truly made an effort and had the ambition to generalise regionalism. In the 1960s, large-scale research projects were developed to test neofunctionalism in other regions of the world (e.g. Haas & Schmitter, 1964). Nonetheless, the inadequacy of neofunctionalism in explaining Latin American regionalism prompted these authors to develop different *ad hoc* adaptations, like the notion of background conditions, which are essential for successful regional integration.

In the 1970s, the neofunctionalist concept of spill-over was complemented with related concepts such as *spill-back*, *spill-around*, and *encapsulation* (Schmitter, 1970). This made neofunctionalist theory more general and compatible with various real-world scenarios (Briceño Ruiz & De Lombaerde, 2018). Despite the setbacks faced by closed regionalism in Latin America by that time, the potential benefits of applying revised Neofunctionalism to analyse these difficulties remained untapped.

Latin American scholars undertook critical examinations of regional integration from an autochthonous point of view instead. The Theory of Autonomy criticised the *commercialist* approach advocated by Structuralism while considering integration as instrumental to promoting development and strengthening autonomy processes. One of the foremost voices in the Theory of Autonomy, Juan Carlos Puig, believed that integration should be driven by the societies seeking it, with the role of the elites being to propel the fabricated or volitional aspect (Puig, 1986). A fruitful start can then accelerate the process through a diffusion of integrative activity in both functional scope and intensity (Puig, 1978). Interestingly, this reveals similarities to the neofunctionalist concepts developed in Europe.

The end of the Cold War, coupled with the rise of neoliberalism and the shift to open regionalism in the 1990s, led to the decline of the autonomy concept in Latin American studies. In the meantime, the advanced theories on the EU increasingly diverged from the realities of regionalism in Latin America. EU studies diversified its objects of study and theoretical frameworks, including views of the EU as a political system, a multilevel governance structure, or through an institutionalist lens, employing Europeanisation literature and post-functional theories (Sebastião & Luciano, 2023).

Later, the emergence of new Latin American regional schemes—and the revitalisation of existing ones—during the 2000s, largely in response to the collapse

⁴ From the early days of independence in the nineteenth century through the early twentieth century, numerous thinkers and political leaders envisioned the regional integration of young Latin American republics (De Lombaerde, 2016). However, we do not explore this topic further due to space constraints.

of the neoliberal model, reignited debates around dependency and autonomy. By then, neither European theoretical perspective informed academic or political practice throughout Latin America. Therefore, examining crises and disintegration could open a new chapter in the dialogue between theories from both sides of the Atlantic.

Dealing with the Challenges of Comparative Regionalism

We need to address the three main challenges mentioned in the introduction. First, the tendency to view the EU as a model of regionalism and judge other regionalisms in terms of a benchmark that draws heavily from the EU's institutions and processes, while ignoring other possible approaches and refusing to view their performance in terms of the goals set by themselves, may be called *EU-centrism* (Acharya, 2016). As is well known, EU-centrism has significantly influenced the study of regionalism in Latin America.

Influence does not necessarily have to be *positive* in the sense of emulating, following, or adapting; it can be *negative* or *reactive*, as seen in the consequences of European crises (Acharya, 2012). At the height of the euro crisis, Acharya (2012) argued that it had the potential to make the study of regionalism less Eurocentric. That change failed to materialise. In fact, the Eurozone crisis and Brexit expanded European integration studies by incorporating the study of regional disintegration alongside regional integration (Nolte & Weiffen, 2021). Therefore, studying disintegration outside of Europe requires a thorough examination of European theories, just as we turn to them for understanding integration.

Second, we need to address the multidimensional and polysemic nature of regionalism. Many scholars overlook the core of the phenomenon by focusing on the adjective *regional* rather than the noun *integration*. The term *regional* denotes scope but not substance (Malamud, 2010). This is a key issue in comparative regionalism that we cannot fully address due to space constraints. For now, it is important to note that we agree with Rodriguez and Haag (2022, p. 2) when they argue that “regional integration has experienced conceptual stretching because of frequent attempts to insert each new regionalist initiative in its conceptual umbrella. This has made it difficult to determine what precisely constitutes an integration process and what does not.”

In the case of Latin America, some scholars claim that regional integration is not likely, and cooperation is the maximum outcome to be expected (Malamud & Gardini, 2012). Or, as Nolte and Weiffen (2021, p. 6) argue, “regionalism outside of Europe usually takes the shape of regional cooperation instead of integration.” Ultimately, while Latin America has pursued integration and even experimented with supranational models akin to those in Europe, and after 60 years of regionalist efforts and two centuries of aspirations of Latin American unity, the product is characterised by fragmentation, overlapping, intergovernmentalism, weak commitments, incomplete free trade areas, and inconsistent results in sectoral cooperation and political dialogue.

Thus, we must first define what is actually disintegrating to explore disintegration. In the case of Latin American regionalism, how can we study the dismantling of integration processes in regions that have yet to achieve a certain level of integration? How can something that is not yet fully integrated disintegrate? (Rodríguez & Haag, 2022). However, are these questions even relevant? Or are we approaching this from a Eurocentric perspective? In other words, is it appropriate to apply European integration theories to explain phenomena in Latin America, where the focus is more on cooperation and coordination rather than full integration?

It is also worth asking: Is it feasible to study the disintegration of regional schemes when, in some cases, no institutions or organisations are present? Are we comparing institutions, governance structures, or something else entirely? Also, when discussing the potential for disintegration at the regional level, are we referring to the dissolution of an organisation, its inactivity, or its dysfunctional operation?

This brings us to the third challenge, diversity. Here, we give precedence to the ontological question, yet we remain mindful of the importance of epistemological and methodological factors. Are Latin American and European regionalisms part of a common category? This condition refers to the ontological dimension in theory construction and is related to an existential question in comparative regionalism, also prominently known as the “ $n = 1$ problem” (De Lombaerde et al., 2010).

We contend that European and Latin American integration share common reasons that allow for a comparison. Nevertheless, they also have their particularities. “Latin American regionalism is characterised by a strong defence of national sovereignty (both as a shield against interferences from outside of the region, but also in regard to regional partners) that combines the rejection of supranational institutions (weak institutionalisation) with a preference for intergovernmental mechanisms with a key role for the presidents (inter-presidentialism)” (Nolte, 2021, p. 191). The latest wave of regionalism in the region merges these traditional elements with more recent features, including overlapping regional organisations, flexible and pragmatic approaches to cooperation, and a variable geometry of regional integration (Nolte, 2021).

Based on its specific characteristics, the research agenda on Latin American regionalism should focus on analysing what intergovernmental, non-binding, overlapping regional organisations can do and what they actually do. Such an orientation differentiates research on Latin American regionalism from EU studies, which emphasise supranational and robust institutions and institutional dynamics; however, it does not preclude the use of analytical concepts from the toolbox of EU studies or reference to theories developed with a focus on the EU.

Can Latin Americans Draw Lessons from Mainstream European Theories about Disintegration?

According to Briceño Ruiz (2018), the effective approach to address Eurocentrism (or EU-centrism as per Acharya) involves giving European theories their proper dimension. European theories may be seen as a toolbox, some of whose categories could have explanatory value beyond Europe. For that, they should be part of a common category and have a sufficiently broad level of abstraction. The more abstract a concept, the more it can explain phenomena outside Europe. Less abstract concepts require contextualisation to determine their applicability to other regions. The challenge lies then in avoiding the uncritical and decontextualised application of EU theories. Let us begin with three key classic theories.

While not guaranteeing full applicability to other regions, Neofunctionalism's core concepts are abstract enough to be applied to regionalisms beyond Europe.⁵ The possibility of expanding the policy scope while keeping the level of authority unchanged (spill-around), regressing in both level of authority and scope (spill-back), or responding to crises with marginal adjustments (encapsulate), could provide valuable insights into the recent crises of the latest wave of regionalism in Latin America (Alvarez & Ramos, 2019). Being abstract and case-independent, these concepts offer broad applicability across contexts.

Liberal intergovernmentalism⁶ may seem to be an obvious choice for extending its explanatory capabilities to Latin America due to its focus on how national governments' interests and domestic political pressures shape their preferences, drive negotiations and influence agreements in intergovernmental settings. In fact, as shown by Mijares and Nolte (2022), by inverting the reasoning of Liberal Intergovernmentalism, a regional organisation would enter a crisis when state preferences concerning the objectives and benefits of cooperation begin to diverge. This occurs when substantive agreements are questioned, and the institutional design no longer ensures the protection of the interests of member states.

However, looking closely at some of its attributes, this approach could be considered less suitable. Instead of Liberal Intergovernmentalism, Inter-presidentialism—though not a theory *per se*—may be a better choice as it is supported domestically by political institutions rather than by societal demands and is propelled by political rather than social preferences. Besides, it is proactive and thus autonomous from previous levels of international interdependence (Malamud, 2015).

Lastly, post-functionalism—which highlights rising politicisation, polarised public opinion on EU issues and identity politics—is inadequate to apply to Latin America for at least two reasons. First, Latin American regionalism is primarily driven by elites or operates in a top-down manner, relying on generally positive public opinion and a nearly unanimous pro-integration stance among political elites. Second, there are overtly low levels of public mobilisation on issues of regional integration compared

⁵ See, Briceño Ruiz & De Lombaerde (2018); Malamud & Schmitter (2006).

⁶ The adjective *liberal* refers to the idea that the economic interests of domestic social actors, rather than the political-strategic interests of states, drive the demand for integration (Malamud, 2010).

to other policy areas (Alvarez, 2021a). Crises in the Latin American context are more associated with the limitations of long-term institutional development—which leaves regionalism dependent on divergent presidential views and waning regional leadership—rather than mass-level politicisation.

But what about other approaches? Walter Mattli's (1999) eclectic perspective posits that successful regional performance hinges on two main factors: the *demand condition* (economic interdependence or transnational activism) and the *supply condition* (institutional arrangements or regional leadership).⁷ Although Mattli's definition of integration is rooted in the European experience, his analytical framework is abstract enough to be applicable to phenomena beyond Europe. By reversing the logic of regional integration, as explained by Vollaard (2018), in this view, disintegration would result from a reduction in the supply of commitment institutions and a regional paymaster, coupled with a declining demand due to decreasing international economic transactions and their associated externalities.

We might also consider alternative frameworks covering topical issues rather than just focusing on disintegration. According to Zürn (2018, p. 97), counter-institutionalisation “describes situations and strategies in and through which international institutions are challenged via the use of other international institutions.” While Zürn's (2018) framework primarily addresses the broader landscape of global governance, its underlying principles possess a versatility that allows for their application to more localised contexts, such as Latin America.

The beginning of this century in Latin America was marked by the emergence of new organisations designed to contest or substitute existing ones. Whenever a new scheme was formed, it did so by excluding neighbouring countries and by intentionally differentiating itself from other (sub)regional organisations, especially in ideological terms. The analysis may reveal common drivers of counter-institutionalisation in Latin American regionalism, including dissatisfaction with existing institutions, ideological differences, power struggles among member states, and differing approaches to engagement with external actors such as the USA.

If we continue to shift our focus from integration theories to those that emphasise institutions, Institutionalism can provide the necessary insights. In response to member exits, we could analyse whether actors within regional organisations strategically adapt their institutional frameworks to optimise their objectives according to Rational Choice Institutionalism (Pollack, 2019). Or we could study whether regional organisations facing member exits may undergo gradual and incremental adjustments rather than experiencing abrupt changes, reflecting Historical Institutionalism's emphasis on path dependency, following Historical Institutionalism (Pierson, 1998).

Alternatively, we could concentrate less on integration theories and more on theories that emphasise the public politicisation of governance beyond the nation-state. This area is not clearly demarcated and includes diverse approaches and conceptualisations (Brack & Gürkan, 2021). This approach could provide a useful strategy adapted to the Latin American context. Drawing on Dabène (2012), a three-phase

⁷ It was applied to the Latin American case (see Malamud, 2010).

analysis—comprising politicisation, depoliticisation, and (re) politicisation—was used to explore the dynamics of post-liberal regional schemes. This analysis emphasised two main factors to account for the different phases: the common interests of governments and their commitment to establishing regional institutional structures (Alvarez, 2021b).

Conclusion

It is undeniable that mainstream European theories have expanded the understanding of regions beyond their initial focus. However, their capacity to address crises and disintegration remains limited. Theories such as Neofunctionalism can act as valuable starting points for examining regionalism, including disintegration, especially when treated as a flexible toolbox. Nonetheless, broadening the scope to include alternative perspectives—such as eclectic approaches, frameworks addressing global governance, or theories centred on international institutions and politicisation beyond the nation-state—can unlock new insights. These alternative perspectives hold significant potential to *travel* to Latin America, helping to capture the region's integrative or disintegrative dynamics.

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Essay 33: Between Ups and Downs: The European Theoretical-Conceptual Approach to Regionalism and How to Rescue It



Cairo Junqueira and Gustavo Gayger Muller

Introduction: The Traditional Approach to Regionalism

Regional integration and regionalism have taken on remarkable importance since the end of the Second World War. The formation of regional blocs, regional organisations, and the institutionalisation of regional cooperation are global historical phenomena. The European Union (EU), formally established with the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, currently comprises the only example of a common market between its 27 member countries with aspects of monetary union. For 80 years, European integration has constantly changed following trends of widening (geographical expansion with the accession of new members) and deepening (intensification of integration). This relatively fast pace of empirical changes gave rise to different theoretical and conceptual explanations that account for unprecedented levels of integration and transfer of authority in Europe. In other words, when we see the creation of regional blocs, International Relations (IR) researchers began to take a closer look at the European context, giving rise to different theories of regional integration, many of which would have the ambition of universal relevance and external validity.

Initially, and considering the particularities of Western Europe, there is a clear link between the theories of IR and the theories of regional integration, especially those of liberal orientation. Although plural in essence, Liberalism in IR has a common thread based on the study of international institutions fostering cooperation and promoting Western values, such as individual and human rights and the promotion of peace. What was essential to limit the possibilities of war between countries right after the

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_33

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Second World War and maintain harmonious relations? Directly or indirectly, this question also guided the mainstream theories of Regional Integration.

That context was fundamental for David Mitrany (1966) when thinking about functionalism as an explanatory theory of Europe. He intended to create a theoretical framework that would allow the European space to be more cooperative and free of conflicts. In Ernst Haas' (2004) Neofunctionalism, a large political community, be it a state or even a regional bloc, could develop if the expectations, ideologies and behaviour patterns of individuals, governments, and the private sector were reinforced by new values, symbols and institutions. This approach gave rise to the idea of integration through supranationalism, in other words, the formation of a new centre of authority.

In later decades, but still anchored in IR Liberalism and in the empirical changes observed in Europe, Intergovernmentalism offered additional, and sometimes alternative, theoretical lenses to analyse regional integration. For Andrew Moravcsik (1998), who echoed the neoliberal and institutionalist approaches, the state remains the ultimate decision-maker. Accordingly, decisions are characterised as intergovernmental, but certain domestic actors influence decision-making, and the creation of institutions results from this domestic-national relationship in a process called intergovernmental bargaining (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2009).

At the end of the 1990s, Constructivism entered the theoretical domain of European integration following the ideational turn of IR theories. It appears as another substantive explanation for regional integration (Risse, 2019). With Constructivism, theories of regionalism pay more attention to norms and values underpinning integration and disintegration, regional identity formation, and discourse at various levels. It also sheds light on the social construction of regions (Buzan & Wæver, 2003) and the variations of regionalism around the world. More recently, as a result of the Maastricht Treaty and the EU's new and complex institutional structure, the concept of Multilevel Governance (MLG) emerged to explain, at the same time, how power was being shared and shaped by various actors and how it was no longer located exclusively at the level of the nation-states. Decision-making was part of the agenda of various levels of government, including supranational, national and sub-national actors (Marks, 1993).

It is clear that theories of regional integration have a European origin. For example, both Neofunctionalism and Liberal Intergovernmentalism analysed economic interdependence in Western Europe. Constructivism debated European identity, while MLG presented a non-state-centred view of the EU, including subnational actors. Hence, the starting point for (mainstream) theorising in regionalism studies is the European experience of cooperation and integration. However, that does not necessarily mean that these theories can 'travel abroad' to other world regions without friction. As Acharya (2012, p. 12) points out, "[r]egional integration is a distinctively Western European idea and is rather limited in scope." How did these theories and concepts enter the non-European debate? Most importantly, do they shed light on processes of integration and disintegration beyond Europe?

The South American Experience of Regionalism

Regionalism is, of course, not an exclusively European phenomenon, and the theoretical debate has travelled to other world regions as different groups of states have come together and formed regional blocs with diverse roots and objectives. In South America, with the political rapprochement of Brazil and Argentina in the 1980s and the creation of the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay in 1991, we find a powerful example of enduring non-European regionalism that is nonetheless often contrasted with the European experience that is taken as a model, both empirically and theoretically. While the EU influenced Mercosur in its organisational structure, the South American bloc acquired the centralisation of decision-making in the national executive branches of government as its main characteristic. In other words, there has never been supranationality in Mercosur as observed in the Western European experience of integration and in today's EU.

There are numerous analyses, however, that interpret Mercosur in the light of European-inspired theories. For example, Caichiolo (2017) applied the precepts of Neofunctionalism and Liberal Intergovernmentalism to conclude that they fail to fully explain Mercosur's characteristics, like the level of institutionalisation and the member states' policy arrangements. Despite this limitation, it is evident that these two theories are relevant in the analysis of South American regionalism, including how scholars see the regional bloc moving forward. For a long time, it was assumed that Mercosur would only advance its integration if it were able to establish supranational bodies. Others still argue that the only path for Mercosur's development is functional integration based on the common commercial interests of its member countries. Meanwhile, the Common Customs Tariff (CCT) is not fully applied due to protectionist policies.

According to Vigevani et al. (2008), some specificities of the Southern Cone integration process are in tension with the central variables of Neofunctionalism and Intergovernmentalism. For the former theoretical approach, social and economic actors must actively participate in the process. Within Mercosur, however, even before 1998, one can observe a decline in the interest of society and private companies (e.g. the automotive sector) in integration. Without sufficient socio-economic support, the regional process did not create its own self-reinforcing dynamics, as neofunctionalists suggest. Concerning the intergovernmental approach, Mercosur's development over almost three decades distances itself from the theory that considers interdependence a necessary condition for integration. An even more autonomous - or supranational - integration has never appeared to be in the interests of political sectors, domestic elites, and social and economic groups.

Therefore, empirical distinctions have limited the applicability of mainstream theories, underpinned by the European experience, to the South American context. As Malamud (2005) argues, contrary to Europe, Mercosur has a supply-side integration where there was no economic interdependence or societal demands before the political decisions that established the regional organisation. This empirical context

underpins a mechanism called “interpresidentialism,” according to which regionalism is heavily embedded in presidential diplomacy and subject to more intense fluctuation according to electoral cycles. Given the prominence of presidential diplomacy, regionalism in South America benefits from ideological and political alignment among its country executives.

Even if it is challenging to think about deeper integration concerning Mercosur, Börzel and Van Hüllen (2015) and Nolte (2016) place governance as a central aspect to think about regionalism, including South America. For the former authors, Mercosur appears as an intermediary between states and global institutions. For the latter, based on a constructivist approach, governance represents a better framework for observing the complex existence of multiple regional blocs in the sub-continent. These classical theories have a degree of applicability to South American regionalism, but have limitations.

Looking Ahead: Towards More Pluralist Regional Studies

As scholars have moved away from viewing the European experience as the definitive model for regional integration (Lenz & Söderbaum, 2025), whether criticising theoretical Eurocentrism (Söderbaum, 2013) or even proposing an epistemological turn to comprehend regionalism (Balogun, 2021), there are now efforts to develop more localised theories that better reflect the specific regional dynamics outside Europe. This shift is partly a response to the limitations of applying European-driven theories to regions like South America, where the historical, political, and economic conditions differ significantly. This understanding of regionalism in its local context without pre-defined benchmarks has led to a broader recognition of multiple forms of regionalism, as well as its drivers, objectives, and dynamics.

However, the insights provided by European theories of regionalism still hold significant value. Notions such as spillover and supranationality, as well as domestic factors in the inter-state bargains, are useful theoretical frames. The current theoretical challenge is to rescue these insights from their Eurocentric frameworks and adapt them to more diverse and inclusive perspectives. This involves critically reassessing these theories assumptions and finding ways to expand their applicability beyond Europe. One way to move beyond Eurocentrism is by integrating postcolonial perspectives into the study of regionalism. Postcolonial theory challenges the dominance of Western-centric models and emphasises the need to consider the historical and structural inequalities that shape regional integration processes in formerly colonised regions. This perspective can help reveal how colonial legacies and the ongoing effects of global power imbalances influence regionalism in places like Latin and South America, Africa, and Asia.

A postcolonial lens further reveals that regionalism in postcolonial regions serves distinct objectives that differ from those of their European counterparts. While European regionalism has historically focused on economic liberalisation and institutional deepening, South American regionalism has been shaped by the quest for political

and economic autonomy from former colonial powers and other dominant actors such as the United States. In addition, the quest for regional autonomy, vis-à-vis global centres of economic and political power, has been a key factor behind regional initiatives and region-building (Deciancio & Riggiozzi, 2018). Scholars of Latin American regionalism (Riggiozzi & Grugel, 2015; Sanahuja, 2012) emphasise the role of autonomous regionalism in promoting self-reliance and reducing dependence on Western-led economic systems. The concept of *post-liberal regionalism* captures this distinct trajectory, as seen in initiatives that emphasise social inclusion and development rather than mere market liberalisation. Unlike the European experience, where integration was framed primarily around interdependence and economic spillovers, regionalism in the Global South frequently intertwines with development strategies aimed at overcoming structural dependencies and geopolitical vulnerabilities.

Therefore, regionalism in the Global South has been deeply intertwined with developmental objectives, focusing on reducing structural inequalities exacerbated by colonialism and external dependency. Scholars (Briceño Ruiz, 2018; Rivarola Puntigliano & Briceño-Ruiz, 2013) have argued that Latin American integration projects have often sought to address persistent asymmetries and promote industrialisation beyond a colonial legacy of reliance on commodity exports. Unlike the European experience, which emerged in a context of relatively balanced industrial economies, Latin American integration has often been driven by the imperative of fostering development through industrialisation and strengthening of internal markets. Additionally, regional organisations in Latin America, such as Mercosur, have had to grapple with intrinsic political and social challenges, such as inequality, governance instability, and fluctuating ideological alignments in presidential systems.

Another relevant area for updating the theory of regionalism is the study of paradiplomacy, which examines the role of sub-national governments, such as regions and cities, in regional integration and regional governance. In the 1980s, academic literature started to develop a more comprehensive conceptual framework for the internationalisation of subnational units, which came to be known as *parallel diplomacy* (Soldatos, 1990). Initial research focused on Federalism, including countries like the United States, Canada and Belgium. Moreover, subnational actors began to be studied from multiple perspectives, such as (a) international actors, (b) participants in foreign policy decision-making, (c) components of city networks, d) integral parts of governance structures, and (e) key players in regional integration (Oddone, 2016).

In a short time, “[...] regional blocs became potential arenas for the development and expansion of subnational actors’ agendas, actions, and initiatives” (Junqueira, 2021, p. 519). In the EU, sub-national issues were incorporated from the beginning of the integration process. The European Regional Development Fund, created in 1975, was the result of pressure to reduce regional disparities and foster territorial cohesion. In 1986, the Eurocities network was formed by large European cities, currently bringing together around 200 members who influence EU policies. The Maastricht Treaty (1992) established the Committee of the Regions (CoR), made up of sub-national representatives, to dialogue with European institutions. With the

development of the EU's Regional Policy, the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) was created, a legal figure that allows border regions to initiate forms of cooperation and institutional integration with relative independence from national authorities (Nadalutti, 2013), paving the way for the deepening of sub-national integration in the EU, although there exist lacks subnational representation within the bloc.

For instance, in South America, the case of the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) is notable. Mercocities Network was launched in 1995, which recognises cities as important players in international relations and integrates objectives such as the protection of democratic institutions. Subsequently, in 2004, the Advisory Forum of Municipalities, Federated States, Provinces and Departments (FCCR) started working on issues such as border integration and regional citizenship. Currently, although there are government initiatives in Brazil to reactivate its functions, the Forum is inoperative and has only been an ad-hoc institution in Mercosur since 2019.

The connection between paradiplomacy and regionalism still finds support in academic debates and practical initiatives. In the African Union, there is no institution for sub-national representation within regional integration. However, there is great potential, especially for the international insertion of cities in South Africa and Nigeria. In Asia, the ASEAN Smart Cities Network is a platform where cities can work on sustainable urban development, inclusion, and technology. Those cases show that recognising the role of cities and regions in shaping regional dynamics not only broadens the scope of regionalism studies but also provides a more decentralised and multi-layered understanding of how regionalism operates in practice.

Finally, geopolitical perspectives offer valuable insights into how regionalism interacts with broader shifts in the global order. During the Cold War, regional dynamics and regionalism were largely shaped by superpower competition, with regional organisations often reflecting ideological alignments. With the end of the Cold War, regions were *set free* (Buzan & Wæver, 2003), leading to a surge in regional integration efforts that were no longer strictly tied to external bipolar security dynamics. However, contemporary global transformations are reshaping regionalism once again. The rise of China, the growing US-China rivalry, the relative decline of Europe's economic and political weight, and challenges to the liberal international order -including pressures on International Law and multilateral institutions- are all influencing the nature of regionalism today.

Beyond external influences, geopolitics also plays a role within regions themselves. Geography continues to impact regional interdependencies, shaping economic, political, and security linkages. Physical barriers, such as vast distances or natural obstacles, can hinder connectivity, while strategic positioning can enhance regional influence (Rivarola Puntigliano, 2021). For example, South Atlantic countries may find themselves geopolitically distant from the Indo-Pacific, which has become the centre of global affairs in the 21st century. Understanding these intra-regional geopolitical factors is essential to fully grasp the challenges and opportunities facing regionalism in different parts of the world.

Finally, the study of European regionalism itself as a *sui generis* case can benefit from insights derived from other regions. Hence, instead of using the European experience as a model and a European-driven theory, we can go the other way, bringing in the dilemmas and debates of integration in places like South America to the analysis of the setbacks in the European process. This includes looking at potentially harmful aspects of regionalism (Debre, 2021) and challenging the widely held assumption that more regional cooperation is inherently positive and a default solution to any given crisis.

Incorporating these research agendas—postcolonial thinking, paradiplomacy, and geopolitics—into the study of regionalism can help scholars develop more nuanced and globally relevant theoretical frameworks. Relevant scholarship has also focused on how regional governance responds to common challenges in areas of environment and natural resources (Obydenkova, 2022), health (Agostinis & Parthenay, 2021; Fernández, 2024), and artificial intelligence and digitalisation (Shahin et al., 2024). As Söderbaum (2013) argues, the problem is not European integration but the construction of certain models of European integration. The new agendas mentioned above are also supported by Comparative Regionalism and Interregionalism, which shed light precisely on the issues raised in this essay in considering—and relativising the application of—classical theories.

Conclusion

Including and comparing other regions and blocs in regionalism studies, with or without the incorporation of the EU, is crucial to developing this field of study. By embracing these perspectives, the study of regionalism can move beyond its Eurocentric roots and better reflect the diverse experiences of regions around the world, providing deeper insights into the complexities of regional integration in the contemporary global order. As argued, we should not disregard the explanatory power of European theoretical approaches. On the contrary, they can be applied and localised elsewhere, but with caution. The case of South America is emblematic in this regard, as it is a region that has historically been influenced by European theoretical perspectives. However, the establishment of regional bodies and institutions has its idiosyncrasies. And that includes the debate on paradiplomacy itself. The creation of Mercocities was stimulated by the homonymous Eurocities, and the FCCR was directly influenced by the Committee of the Regions. However, Mercocities is an autonomous organisation and is not inside Mercosur's structure, whereas the Forum is stagnated and paralysed. Looking at those particularities is to go beyond the classical debate, although rescuing it is fundamental. By incorporating geopolitical and postcolonial dimensions, regionalism studies can better capture the complexities of integration processes, recognising that regional projects are not only shaped by historical legacies and power asymmetries but also by the evolving global order and the strategic imperatives of their own geographic and political realities.

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Essay 34: The Evolution of Comparative Regionalism: A New Typology



Tobias Lenz and Fredrik Söderbaum

Introduction

For more than 60 years, scholars of Comparative Regionalism¹ have struggled over how to deal with European integration and, more recently, the European Union (EU).² Two polarised perspectives have dominated the debate (Acharya, 2016; Söderbaum, 2016). On one side, European integration is taken as the foundation and model, even the *gold standard* for conceptual development and theory-building, giving rise to numerous hub-and-spoke comparisons centred around the EU. On the other side, scholars reject the EU as the key referent due to its alleged uniqueness and the problem of EU-centrism, turning instead to exclusively *non*-European cases.

This essay rethinks the divide between the EU and the rest and how it has evolved over time.³ We argue that the common rendering of the division conflates two distinct axes of contestation: (1) whether the EU is, in principle, comparable to other cases

¹ We understand Comparative Regionalism as an interdisciplinary field of study that examines the nature, drivers, dynamics, and consequences of processes of state-led regionalism and society-/private actor-led regionalisation beyond the national state in comparative perspective. It draws on a range of academic disciplines, including political science, International Relations, economics, law, and area studies.

² The acronym 'EU' also includes its predecessor organisations such as the European Community.

³ The essay draws in parts on Lenz and Söderbaum (2025).

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Table 1 Historical Evolution of Comparative Regionalism

	Comparable with the EU	Non-comparable with the EU
EU-centrism	1. EU as the <i>gold standard</i>	2. EU as a case <i>sui generis</i>
Non-EU-centrism	4. Global Comparative Regionalism	3. Regionalism in the Global South

of regionalism and (2) whether the EU is accorded a special status in the analysis (EU-centrism versus non-EU-centrism). These two axes of contestation constitute a 2x2 typology (Table 1), which allows us to trace the historical evolution of the field. Speaking directly to the sociology of knowledge in Comparative Regionalism, the proposed typology provides a way of considering both the research field's organisation throughout the last 60 years and how it is currently transforming⁴.

The above four cells describe phases in the evolution of the research field that roughly build on each other in terms of their inception. Each entails a critique of earlier phase(s), but there is extensive temporal overlap between them, with research fitting each cell continuing to this day. We believe that temporal evolution, especially towards the latest phase, constitutes empirical and normative progress. The EU's (re-)integration into Comparative Regionalism retains the comparative impetus that has been central to the field's definition, with its clear methodological advantages, but puts comparison on a more symmetrical footing, eschewing EU-centrism. As a result, the divide between the EU and regionalism in the rest of the world has *ceased* to be the field's defining characteristic.

Our essay proceeds in four sections, each of which discusses one of the cells of our typology. A brief conclusion assesses progress in the latest phase.

Phase 1: EU as the *Gold Standard*

The field of Comparative Regionalism emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s, triggered by the early success of European integration and the subsequent emergence of similarly ambitious processes in other parts of the world. Early research quickly established comparison as a powerful approach to understanding commonalities and differences, but such comparison was highly asymmetric: the EU was widely seen as providing the gold standard on which other cases of regionalism were assessed.

While Ernst Haas' foundational *The Uniting of Europe* from 1958 was a single case study of the EU's early evolution, he and his students quickly pursued explicit comparisons. Work in the 1960s and 1970s extensively compared the EU to ambitious efforts at regional economic integration that emerged during this period in Latin America and Africa. Yet, comparisons tended to be EU-centric. Even if neofunctionalists were acutely aware of the complex character of the European Communities and problems of comparability, they promoted EU-centric, hub-and-spoke comparisons with other regions. Scholars like Ernst Haas and Philippe Schmitter searched first

⁴ We are grateful to Kalypso Nicolaïdis for helping us develop the two dimensions of the typology.

and foremost for background conditions, functional equivalents, and spill-over effects derived from the study of European integration (Haas & Schmitter, 1964). Indeed, the EC was considered the *gold standard*, and these scholars believed in learning from, even imitating, the European integration experience. Haas' own words are here worth repeating:

Integration among discrete political units is a historical fact in Europe, but disintegration seems to be the dominant *motif* elsewhere. Cannot the example of successful integration in Europe be imitated? Could not the techniques of international and supranational cooperation developed in Luxembourg, Paris, and Brussels be put in use in Accra, Bangkok, and Cairo, as well as on the East River in New York? (Haas, 1961, p. 366).

Haas explained the lack of regional integration outside Europe as having resulted from the fact that “countries dominated by a non-pluralistic social structure are poor candidates for participation in the integration process” (Haas, 1961, p. 375). The same observation spurred Nye (1971) to develop a revised neofunctionalist model in non-Western countries such as African states. Yet, the neofunctionalist approach experienced difficulties in identifying comparable cases, and its proponents were regularly confronted with the *absence* of regional integration or its failure elsewhere. This led to the decline of the EU-centric perspective in the 1970s, with Ernst Haas famously declaring the “obsolescence of regional integration theory” in 1975 (Haas, 1975). Clearly, this stance was rooted in a particular form of European-derived *regional integration* and overlooked the rich histories of regional interaction elsewhere.

After being dormant for a while – as the EU started being treated as a case *sui generis* (phase 2, see below) – EU-centric comparative regionalism witnessed a revival from the 1990s onwards. The revived EU-centric literature continued comparing other cases of regionalism, implicitly or explicitly, to the EU's own path (Mattli, 1999; Laursen, 2010). Even if these comparisons were less explicitly EU-centric than during earlier periods, leading scholars considered European integration multidimensional, highly institutionalised, and generally successful – both a descriptive and prescriptive contention – whereas regionalism in the rest of the world was seen as informal, weakly institutionalised or failed (Schmitter & Kim, 2008, p. 23). By the late 2000s, however, many came to share Hurrell's (1995, p. 39) criticism of “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,” and overtly EU-centric comparisons have become less common.

Phase 2: EU As a Case *Sui Generis* (N=1)

Following Haas and others' EU-centric comparisons, many Europeanists grew sceptical of such comparisons from the 1970s onwards. As European integration continued to deepen, large parts of the scholarly community came to consider the EU as a nascent polity in its own right. Wallace (1983) was among the first to characterise

the EU as “less than a federation, more than a regime,” and this problematic ontology, many argued, rendered comparison with other cases of regionalism difficult, if not outright misleading. As Caporaso notes,

As the European Community (EC) developed, thickened its institutional base, expanded the scope of its policy competences, and in general became more complex, it also came to be studied more narrowly, in isolation from other regional integration processes and some would argue in isolation from social theory itself. (Caporaso, 1997, p. 2).

The EU’s increasing conceptualisation as a case *sui generis* rendered comparisons with other cases of regionalism fruitless, and *European integration/EU studies* emerged as an independent field of study. While the denial of the EU’s comparability in this phase was diametrically opposed to the emphasis in the previous phase on hub-and-spoke comparisons with the EU at the centre, the outlook was similarly EU-centric: the EU was seen as a uniquely advanced form of supranational political integration and thus constituted a category of its own. This is known as the N=1 problem (Caporaso, 1997).

From the 1990s onwards, following another major boost of the newly created EU’s authority with the Maastricht Treaty, scholars tried to escape the parochialism related to the N=1 problem by seeking comparisons not with other cases of regionalism but with federal systems in advanced industrial states, such as the United States. A corollary of this view was that established tools of political science and comparative politics could be used in EU Studies and that International Relations was not equipped to deal with the complexity of the modern EU (Hix, 1994). Specifically, approaches taken from policy analysis, public administration, and institutional analysis flourished during the 1990s and 2000s (Jupille & Caporaso, 1999), moving the EU towards comparison with nation-states rather than other regional projects.

Today, an influential strand of literature studies the EU as an instance of state-building (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022). This perspective re-emphasises the process dimension that was characteristic of earlier integration theories and IR approaches and endorses, theoretically more than empirically, a comparative perspective, taking other historical instances of state formation as suitable points of comparison. There are some parallels in the EU’s highly imbalanced institutional development with “episodes of state-building in Latin America, Asia, and Africa” (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022, p. 965), but the EU continues to be seen as a case *sui generis* in terms of *regionalism*. The implicit epistemological position is that the EU is too advanced as a supranational polity and state-building project to make for fruitful comparisons.

Phase 3: Regionalism in the Global South

The flip side of the perspective portraying the EU as a case *sui generis* is the view that regionalism in the Global South is best analysed independently of the EU. Yet, unlike debates on the EU itself (phase 2), this perspective eschews EU-centrism and gradually develops cross-case comparisons.

Discussions of regionalism in the developing world from the late 1950s on, especially in Latin America and Africa, were heavily influenced by the structuralist tradition of economic development, which developed as deliberately distinct from the European concern with liberal economic integration as a means to avoid war. It was commonly believed that the underlying conditions for regionalism and the goals pursued through it were so different in the developing world when compared to the EU that a different theory was necessary. The two were seen as incomparable cases, even incomparable worlds (Axline, 1977, pp. 83-86; also see Acharya, 2016; Söderbaum, 2016). Continuing into the 1980s, many scholars and policymakers believed there was a single *model* of regionalism applicable across the Global South, but the EU was an unsuitable point of reference based on its alleged uniqueness.

However, cross-case comparisons in the Global South were initially sparse, and scholarship often suffered from what Thompson (1973) referred to as *area-centricity*. It was widely assumed that the political and historical context of regionalism was of fundamental importance, and different regions were believed to be too *different* to compare. The tendency of scholars to eschew cross-case comparisons led to the proliferation of new, or otherwise the idiosyncratic use of, existing concepts. Rather than facilitating comparison by making concepts transferable across cases and generalising insights, scholars in this tradition of area studies confined their claims to single cases of regionalism or, at most, to particular regions. This served as a breeding ground for parochialism, quite similar to the N=1 problem within EU Studies (Warleigh-Lack et al., 2011). In our understanding, single case studies are often essential for understanding the diverse regional trajectories of regional cooperation as well as for escaping the dominance of EU-centric conceptual and theoretical perspectives. However, while there are many ways through which single case studies of regionalism can contribute to Comparative Regionalism, we believe that such studies should attempt to contribute to knowledge beyond the single case. The central premise of Comparative Regionalism – similar to Comparative Politics – is that specific instances of regionalism can best be understood comparatively, in juxtaposition with similar cases, requiring transferable, rather than idiosyncratic, concepts and theories (see more below).

This area-centredness changed in the 1990s. The exploding literature on *new regionalism* emphasised regionalism as a global and multidimensional phenomenon involving both state and non-state actors across a growing number of policy fields and in a variety of institutional forms, and engaged in cross-case comparison. This literature enabled scholars to analyse differences across cases in different parts of the world and, in so doing, offered alternative understandings of regional dynamics that hitherto had received limited attention within the EU-centric literature. Among the new insights were regionalism as a political response to neoliberal globalisation, regionalism versus regionalisation, regime-boosting regionalism, and so on.

Although Europe or the EU were sometimes included in cross-regional comparisons (Hettne et al., 1999; Söderbaum, 2016), many scholars belonging to this camp did not see comparison to Europe as beneficial because they seemed to fear the intellectual hegemony of EU scholarship and that comparisons with the EU as a case would distort the analysis. There seemed to be an underlying assumption among

scholars focusing on regionalism in other parts of the world (especially in the Global South) that it was not possible to compare other regions to the EU without falling back on EU-centrism (Bøås et al., 2005; Engel et al., 2017; Krapohl, 2017). In response to the perceived drawbacks of EU-centrism, these scholars often either excluded the EU altogether or emphasised the differences of regionalism in the rest of the world vis-à-vis the EU.⁵

Phase 4: Global Comparative Regionalism

Since the mid-2010s, the field of Comparative Regionalism has been evolving in three ways: (1) a more disaggregated *conceptual* approach to regionalism, (2) a *theoretical* approach that derives arguments from general social science theories and actively questions EU-centrism, and (3) more rigorous comparative research designs fed by more systematic data gathering and *methodological* reflection. These changes, we believe, mark a new phase in the evolution of Comparative Regionalism because scholars now endorse systematic comparative work across cases of regionalism that include the EU case on an equal footing and without giving the EU special status (non-EU-centrism). The research field is becoming more genuinely global.

Conceptualisation. The first change concerns the way in which scholars conceptualise regionalism as an object of study. Much prior research sought to analyse processes of regionalism in their entirety (i.e. regionalism in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and so forth), which in many ways reinforced the divide between the EU and the rest. Today, the holistic conceptual perspective has given way to a dominant style of analysis that disaggregates regionalism into more specific elements, such as individual policy fields, norms, governance mechanisms, or institutions. Such disaggregation is closely related to the expansion of regionalism as an empirical phenomenon, specifically the growing scope and differentiation in a wide range of policy fields all over the world (Börzel & Risse, 2016; De Lombaerde, 2024; Rüland & Carrapatoso, 2022). The study of regional institutions and governance mechanisms has also taken off throughout the last decade, which has gone hand in hand with centring more abstract and general questions around core social science concepts related to authority, institutional design and governance (ibid.). The move has made the systematic comparison more tractable and facilitated a move beyond EU-centrism, as well as anti-EU-centrism, in that core concepts derive from general social science rather than the EU experience or a critique of it – weaknesses that characterised previous phases.

Regarding *theorisation*, novel theoretical perspectives deliberately question EU-centrism and may have their origin or flagship case outside the EU. Maybe the

⁵ The latter type of anti-EU-centrism became counterproductive because by constantly emphasising the difference between the EU and other cases of regionalism, the EU remained at the centre of discussion. This is where anti-EU-centrism and EU-centrism touch: both share an *obsession* with the EU.

most obvious theoretical development showing that Comparative Regionalism has moved beyond the EU versus the rest divide is the growing prominence of various governance approaches (Börzel & Risse, 2016; Rüländ & Carrapatoso, 2022). Governance approaches to regionalism emerged as a critique of conventional state-centric notions, and with it, the parochialism in EU Studies and area-centricity of much anti-EU-centric work began fading, leading to fresh theory-building on the basis of an explosion of productive comparisons between a wide range of regional governance mechanisms around the world.

Theorisation has also been enhanced by the decentring agenda within EU Studies as well as a range of debates about Global IR and the decolonisation of knowledge. The *decentring agenda* questions take the European experience as a *given* and actively challenge the view of Europe as the model, reference point, or gold standard for other regions (Lenz & Nicolaïdis, 2019). This perspective changes the relationship between the EU and other regions within comparative regionalism, meeting calls of global IR and other perspectives to put the agency of Global South actors in regionalism at the centre stage (Acharya, 2016; Balogun, 2021). While these studies sometimes emphasise the specific contextual conditions under which regionalist projects develop (often in the Global South), the strongest work is framed under the umbrella of a genuinely *Global* Comparative Regionalism, which integrates rather than excludes the EU and where the concepts and theories used have the potential to travel elsewhere (De Lombaerde, 2024; Rüländ & Carrapatoso, 2022; Söderbaum, 2016).

Regarding *methodology*, we witness an upsurge in more self-conscious and symmetric comparative work, both quantitative and qualitative. With regard to quantitative research methods, the turn to Global Comparative Regionalism is, to a considerable extent, triggered by what may be referred to as a *data revolution*, which is most evident in the comparative analysis of regional organisations and regional governance mechanisms (Lenz et al., 2022). Most of these data collection efforts concentrate either on one or several policy fields and/or various types of institutional features. A general ambition to escape EU-centrism in favour of general concepts and abstract measures is often evident. The best work in this vein grounds its data collection effort in general concepts of social science – institutional design, international authority, policy output – that have concrete empirical referents, are minimally sensitive to contextual differences across cases, and are operationalised in clear and transparent ways.

In qualitative scholarship, it is increasingly unsatisfactory to emphasise regional *context* and regional *uniqueness* without situating the case within a broader universe and general theoretical discussion while avoiding the pitfalls of both EU-centrism as well as anti-EU-centrism (Balogun, 2021; De Lombaerde, 2024; Rüländ & Carrapatoso, 2022). Even area studies specialists now regularly advocate for a more comparative approach to area studies, building on the view that intensive regional research remains indispensable but will be marginalised unless it employs comparative referents from other regions, including the EU, and contextualised findings in a cross-regional perspective (Ahrām et al., 2018). In our view, this approach marks a major step towards a less parochial – and more global – understanding of Comparative Regionalism as a field of study (see, Lenz & Söderbaum, 2025).

Conclusion

This essay has shown that throughout the last six decades, there has been a struggle over the EU's role in the comparative study of regionalism. We argue that the research field has entered a new phase in which the *EU versus the rest* divide has become obsolete. In this phase, scholars *integrate* the EU within a more *symmetrical* comparative agenda, building on general concepts and theoretical arguments as well as more rigorous comparative designs and research methods. This more mature research agenda helps the research field move away from EU-centrism on the one hand and *area-centricity* and anti-EU-centrism on the other, marking a *maturation* of research practices characteristic of other areas of political science and International Relations.

The benefits of a more mature research agenda are two-fold: first, intellectual energy is freed to further improve existing research. Second, findings more easily link up with, and ultimately promise to shape, broader debates in political science, International Relations and Comparative Area Studies; as a result, the field becomes less isolated and parochial.

In spite of its benefits, the latest phase – Global Comparative Regionalism – requires further consolidation. Two issues stand out. First, while overt forms of EU-centrism have come to an end, EU-centrism may survive in less overt forms that are harder to detect. This pertains particularly to the relationship between EU-centrism and continued *Western* dominance in global knowledge production. For example, does a subtle form of EU-centrism survive in various governance approaches, even if these are rarely derived from the EU's institutional experience itself? Similarly, does the focus on formal institutionalisation in much contemporary research reveal a subtle form of EU-centrism, or *Western bias* more broadly, in the generic assumptions that underpin research? Second, knowledge production in Global Comparative Regionalism remains skewed towards *Western* scholars and those located in *Western* academic institutions. More pluralism and diversity in terms of the sociological characteristics of the research field are clearly desirable.

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Part III
How Could/Should Global Regionalism
Look Like?

Essay 35: Delineating a Global Regionalism Agenda



Melisa Deciancio and Diana Tussie

Introduction

The early years of the twenty-first Century have witnessed an intensification in the carving out of the regional level of analysis and in the study of regions across the globe. Ethel Solingen's 1999 *Regional Orders at Century's Dawn* (Solingen, 1999) was a pioneering study on how states throughout the world acted regionally to respond, confront and adapt to the rapid emergence of a global economy no longer structured around North, South and East-West lines. The relevance of Solingen's study is that it studied the breadth of regions and their distinctiveness outside the hub of central powers. It showed the significance of the regional level of analysis and opened the question of whether regions should be considered sites of global governance, locally distinct but connected to international orders.

Regionalism, regionalisation, regions, comparative regionalism, and the history of regional processes have since expanded and grown within academic communities to interpret and understand regional integration's political and economic dynamics. Regionalism studies in different areas of the world have developed ideas and produced concepts, interpretations and situated analyses of the place of regions in global political economy and international relations.

The call for global regionalism opens many questions regarding scope, aims, and feasibility. What does it mean to make regionalism global? Is this even possible? If so, what should global regionalism look like? To address these questions, we will build our argument mirroring the Global International Relations (GIR) project (Acharya, 2014) and identify three central dimensions of regionalism to consider

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_35

when delineating an agenda on global regionalism. We sustain that a global regionalism agenda should put regionalism's adaptive and transformative capacity at the centre. The emphasis should be placed on the agency of regional actors in engaging with one another and in shaping the global order through their material, ideational, and interaction capabilities. This is the possibility of acting away and beyond global powers' dynamics and shaping, contesting, and influencing the established order.

In 2014, Amitav Acharya called to put regions at the centre of International Relations in his Global IR project (Acharya, 2014). Following Acharya's claim that regions are "dynamic, purposeful, and socially constructed spaces" (Acharya, 2014, p. 650) and that "regionalism today is much more open, "porous", inter-regionally interactive, non-hegemonic, and multifaceted than that of the nineteenth Century or early twentieth-century variety" (Acharya, 2014, p. 650) we bring some insights to think and delineate a global regionalism agenda.

We will explore Latin American regionalism as our argument's leading case and basis. Regions and regionalism have been central to Latin American IR, which is already well-known. Regionalism is hardly *new*; as a channel for spreading policies, it dates back to the struggles for independence and the coetaneous conformation of republics with startling degrees of social and organisational cohesion (Tussie, 2009). Latin American regionalism predates the formation of the nation-state. Still, regionalism as such was wiped out of global relations as soon as the world was structured into East-West and North-South in the aftermath of the Second World War. Regions were marginalised into an amorphous outer space, the periphery. Yet, several Latin American scholars approached IR theory through the lenses of regionalism, putting its concepts and debates at the centre of the agenda (Deciancio, 2016b). They developed a myriad of conceptualisations led by a now well-established epistemic community that is regional but also international and inter-regional in reach and scope.

From this starting point, we will first position regionalism within the broader Global IR debate from Latin America's perspective to advance our proposal on what global regionalism should look like. Second, we will focus on regionalism's adaptive and transformative capacity as guiding features of global regionalism. Lastly, conclusions will follow. We argue that in the search for pluralism and inclusiveness, global regionalism should pay attention to its own dynamics as a field that does not necessarily go in line with the experience of the International Relations (IR) field and the Global IR project. Furthermore, it should transcend the geographical disputes on theories of regionalism and the place of European theories to understand other conceptual and practical forms of regionalism.

Global IR and Regionalism

The global IR project introduced a fundamental and necessary discussion to the IR field. It called to broaden the conversation, universalise and pluralise the study of IR by bringing *the rest in* (Acharya & Buzan, 2019; Bilgin & Smith, 2024; Gelardi,

2019; Lohaus & Wemheuer-Vogelaar, 2020; Shahi, 2023). As Western IR theory was manifestly unable to cover the questions of relevance for IR scholars around the world (Bilgin, 2008; Tickner & Blaney, 2013), Global IR proposed to bring non-Western approaches *back in* in a call for a more inclusive and hence explanatory IR agenda, transcending binary distinctions and recognising multiple foundations for the discipline if it was meant to provide encompassing understandings (Acharya, 2014; Acharya & Buzan, 2010).

On this road, GIR puts regions at the centre of the scene, calling for the importance of conceptualising and investigating forms and functions of regionalism to bring non-European experiences into light (Acharya, 2014). The end of North-South and East-West governing principles has led to an increasingly decentralised system, setting the stage for a new geography and reconfiguring political-diplomatic strategies. In fact, “scholars of regionalism see regions as the fundamental, even driving force of world politics” (Fawn, 2009, p. 5). Regions became arenas of contestation, cooperation, competition, and interstate coalition building (Tussie, 2009). They are central in terms of policy, projects, and concepts, as well as in defining alternative approaches to regionalism and IR (Deciancio, 2016b).

While the GIR project gave a central place to regions in the pluralisation of a markedly Western discipline and understood regions as a means to globalise IR, it can also offer a framework to reflect on the pluralisation of regionalism and the dynamics that affect its global scope. The following section will introduce the first approach to global regionalism.

Shaping and Defining Global Regionalism

The studies of IR and regionalism share several similarities but are not identical phenomena. By proposing a Global Regionalism agenda of research, we need to take into account the shared commonalities and, even more, their differences to avoid over-generalisations and, in an attempt to *broaden* the scope, ending up reproducing the kind of approaches we are trying to change, that is, neglecting *the others*. A global approach to regionalism does not mean just setting the lens at the global level but acknowledging and recognising the multiple foundations, forms and contexts where regionalist projects emerge. Narlikar pointed out that “we no longer allow the marginalisation of the ‘rest’...from the mainstream debate. It means not being *critical* for the sake of it but engaging with content from the South/the regions –be it theoretical or empirical–on its own terms. The two keywords that define this content are inclusiveness and pluralism” (Narlikar, 2016, p. 3). This should be the departing point of any attempt to globalise regionalism studies.

How regionalism developed in Europe, particularly after the EEC was born in 1958, set the main basis of its study and established the form and shape regional integration should have in practice. In the process, it overshadowed the many roads elsewhere and moved the focus away from what was being thought and implemented in other regions. When turning the lens on how regionalism developed in the Global

South, a whole set of conceptualisations and questions that differ significantly from those in Europe emerge. Regionalism has a broader and more global origin than regional integration and comparative regional integration studies. Regional integration is mainly a Western European idea and is quite limited (Acharya, 2012). The ideas and literature of regionalism come from many regions, including Latin America, Asia, North America, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe.

Regionalism has been defined as exploring “contemporary flows of transnational cooperation and cross-border flows through comparative, historical, and multilevel perspectives” (Mittelman, 1999, p. 26). While the European Union (EU) is often used as a template both in academic and policy terms, the EU’s ideational basis for cooperation is not emulated. Contrasting the (lack) of declaratory values by regional initiatives gives indications of intentions. As James Mittelman, for example, writes, African and Asian countries do not share the state aspirations found in the Treaty that inspired the EU. Legally binding instruments are not characteristic of SADC or ASEAN and are unlikely to propel their experience (Mittelman, 1999). In Latin America, in contrast, cooperation for development is one of those state-directed ends or changes for which regionalism may be designed, even though development is an essentially contested concept, reflected in diverse theories and strategies explaining what development is and how to get there.

Many works on regionalism argue that we lack a theory of regions despite the existence of some interesting literature in this regard showing a methodological perspective that acknowledges the social construction of regions by both state and non-state actors. This still begs the question of whether we need to develop what we might call a grand theory of regions. In IR, security institutions have received comparisons over time and space. Faced with the difficulty of building a grand theory, comparative regionalism constitutes part of the solution. UNU-CRIS, under the leadership of De Lombaerde, has advanced this road extensively (De Lombaerde, 2016; De Lombaerde et al., 2016). Comparative regionalism rightly warns about the necessity of knowing about what we are comparing.

John Agnew’s charge to transcend the *territorial trap*—the problematic assumptions of many IR scholars regarding the relationship between state and territory: that the state commands sovereignty over its entire territorial jurisdiction; that political and economic life is separated neatly into domestic and international realms, and state borders define that economy and society. Indeed, rather than presupposing the boundary between state and region or viewing regions necessarily as products of state action, it is argued here that the precise location of this boundary is often one of the main issues at stake in regionalisation. The politics of regionalisation could thus be understood as a unique kind of territorial politics. It is similar to more conventional forms of territorial politics, which typically focus on the relationship between subnational regions and national governments, in that it centres on contestations over the scale at which particular issues are governed. It differs, however, because regionalisation is often concerned with creating new spatial and territorial constructs that may vary according to the issues and forces involved. In such instances, boundaries must not only be defended but actually defined (Hameiri, 2013).

What Should Global Regionalism Look like? A First Approach

Whereas the mainstream literature on regionalism (especially in IR) has favoured generalisations from the case of the EU when building theories, the tendency has been reversed in the more critical and radical literature on regional integration in the developing world. The vigorous links between formal and informal regionalism are an essential contribution of regionalism in the developing world to broader regionalism studies.

Adaptive Regionalism

Regionalism, both as theory and practice, has changed over time. Changes require adaptability and flexibility. Most regions in the world have gone through internal change processes from national to regional levels. From processes of independence to institutional, political and economic changes, crises, and resurgence mark the historical context of the majority. This has required regionalism to become adaptive and flexible. While institutional rigidity has mainly worked in the case of the EU, flexibility has been the rule in most regions.

This possibility of adaptiveness contributed to developing innovative and fresh approaches to regionalism (Börzel, 2016; Fawcett, 2004). In practice, this led to various forms and functions with different purposes and actors involved (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2021). This has also been reflected in its study, problematisations, methodological approaches, and conceptual development (how much sense does post-hegemonic regionalism have if applied to the EU?) (Quiliconi, 2022).

Understanding regionalism's flexibility and change as a negative feature of how regionalism has been carried out in the periphery is the main problem. The issue here is not whether European theories are applied to the cases of other regions of the world but rather their normative bias. By evaluating Latin American regionalism through the lens of European theories, a how-things-should-be-done message is being delivered, and a *standard of regionalisation* is being applied. By focusing the debate on theories and the pre-eminence of European theories in regionalism studies, we take the risk of de-centring the discussion again to put the European experience at the centre, diluting the long trajectory that studies on regionalism have in other regions, such as the case of Latin American regionalism (Deciancio, 2016a; Fawcett, 2004). Thus, the discussion should focus on what Acharya pointed out as bringing histories, concepts and approaches from other contexts "on their own terms" (Acharya, 2014). Regionalism as policy and study should be understood in its adaptive and flexible capacity, as this is how it has developed in most regions of the world. Its adaptive nature means that its contours shift across time as key actors rooted in national socio-political contexts craft regionalism in the service of agendas against the backdrop of the prevailing international economic order.

In short, the study of regions is fundamental to IR. However, regions are ongoing projects; arguably, because not only their goals and capacities but also their very memberships can change, they are potentially more complicated to study than states (Quiliconi & Espinoza, 2017). The very degree of change among regions is a requirement for ongoing study. The diverse views on how they interrelate to and influence one another and the different goals they can assume—from (mere) trade to the formation of security communities—again make them challenging to theorise while making that also a necessity (Fawn, 2009).

Regionalism studies have produced and developed many approaches, conceptualisations, and understandings of regionalism, what it looks like, and what we can learn from each experience. Scholarly production on regionalism has reflected the challenges and potential of regionalism in a specific region, identifying contextual, material and cultural particularities tied to the particular context. Would it make sense to do it another way? No. Regionalism outside the EU did not emerge or is based on rejecting mainstream/European theories of regionalism, but by subsuming them and putting them in dialogue with other experiences. The nature of the study of regions and global regionalism requires that the approach not be a straitjacket and recognise its adaptability and flexibility.

Transformative Regionalism

Regionalism is transformative. It changes the reality of people and states, whether in the search for peace, democratic stability, economic growth or regional coordination and solidarity. The transformative capacity of regionalism has been proven in many historical contexts, both in the Global North and the Global South.

For countries in the Global South, regionalism is transformational in many ways. It can shape development agendas and projects at the regional and national levels. At the global level, regionalism becomes a means to shape the global order from the periphery. This translated into alternative and innovative policy and diplomatic strategies to influence global governance and the definition of international rules, political agreements, and coordination to delineate alternative forms of cooperation and regionalisation, etc. (Deciancio & Tussie, 2020; Kacowicz, 2018). and generate those spatial conditions of production deemed vital to attain desired economic and social ends (Deciancio & Quiliconi, 2022; Riggiozzi, 2020).

As Nesadurai argues (2022), using this conception of regionalism as transformational is analytically useful for three reasons. First, it directs attention to how governments, markets and all social actors use regional collective action to help them overcome what they perceive to be spatial constraints or to create spatialised opportunities to advance development goals that would not have been possible by states acting alone. Second, this conception does not set out, a priori, the meaning and goals of development or specific regionalist configurations but allows for considering a more comprehensive range of regionalist projects as development-focused if referred to or practised in those terms by decision-makers and other key actors. Third,

such a conception also directs attention to the politics of regionalism in the global order. Collective international projects require an underlying set of shared interests and especially shared ideas and practices among participating states and other actors about how a regional project is to be constituted so that it creates those conditions of production deemed vital to achieving desired development goals, giving rise to distinct and often politicised models for organising and justifying policies and practices on a regional scale. The analytical focus also helps to locate the analysis within Acharya's call for Global International Relations that sees regionalisms and regions as purposefully transformative through the exercise of agency, linking it to the local constructions of global order.

Conclusion

Since the European integration process marked regionalism, it is assumed that its leading ideas then travelled to the rest of the regions in the following decades. However, the experience of Latin American regionalism shows that regionalism was being designed and planned as a policy strategy and conceptualised and debated long before. In this sense, in the attempt to globalise regionalism and make it more plural, it is essential to consider the risk of diluting what has already been done in the regions to go back to the Europe-centred theoretical debate to fit in the *international standards*. As globalisation itself became a way of homogenisation and westernisation of the rest of the world, making disciplines more global (despite such efforts' good intentions) could also be, on the one hand, the way the mainstream comprises concepts and ideas from other regions of the world but does nothing with them and, on the other hand, how the periphery embraces mainstream and critical regionalism concepts to adapt its own production to mainstream standards imposed from the North. In this sense, we can think of regionalism as being global in its subject study. Still, we can question its globalising scope in Western academic terms, showing the risk that globalising purposes create for how different parts of the world approach regionalism in its own terms. A global regionalism agenda should avoid making peripheral problems more diffuse, blurry and imperceptible, implying that the only ones capable of thinking about and developing solutions to those problems are only a reduced group of actors. In this sense, inclusiveness can only be assured if we are ready to consider excluded voices, and pluralism can only be achieved if we are willing to recognise alternative ideas, theories, and practices (Narlikar, 2016).

Regionalism might well be practical and problem-solving. Yet this feature should not deflect an effort to generalisation and hence drop from purview the steps to theory building, in the same way that accepted IR concepts, such as complex interdependence, were a way of addressing the complexities of the post-Bretton Woods moment for the United States. Likewise, received templates with precise steps to build a customs union (Balassa) or functionalism (Mitrany) became theories of integration. Therefore, an effort to analyse and explain global regionalism can well be

taken up with paucity and cross-fertilisation. Regions cut across every dimension of the study of world politics and bring out the diversity of actors driving world politics.

Moreover, given the intensity of regional action, regions have come to constitute the architecture of global politics and are hence central to the study of IR, as coined in Katzenstein's concept *A World of Regions* in 2005 (Katzenstein, 2005) and as Etel Solingen's work on regional orders showed (Solinigen, 1999). Such works put forward several questions for a broader study of regions that can help to avoid the flaws of over-generalisation and, at the same time, do not get mired in specificities and excessive microscopic detail about the format of regionalism, i.e., formal or informal, transfer of sovereignty, availability or not of dispute settlement mechanisms. Along with this effort to explain regionalism as a global development inspired by the above discussion, we pick out four broad questions.

In the first place, since regions also build on and construct identities, "[t]he study of regions may be a particular area in IR in which to develop further analytical synergies between realism and constructivism" (Fawn, 2009). Secondly, regionalism leads to the creation of distinct regional orders. Are regions local or international orders? Thirdly, we need to ask what role a dominant power plays in initiating, reacting or obstructing the emergence of a region. In this vein, what are the motives and agendas displayed, be they trade, health, migration, or connectivity cooperation, the latter an issue in which China has become a prime mover? The latter point leads to our fourth question, which can help to draw a picture of global regionalism. Are specific cases rooted in engagement with the world economy in the characteristic way that open regionalism was? Is regionalism likewise strategically positioned to harness global incentives? Or carving out instrumental spaces for autonomy, either to resist or evade foreign interference (Deciancio & Tussie, 2020). As Narlikar pointed out, a detailed context-sensitive understanding is crucial in sparking a dialogue about how concepts and ideas travel across regions and cultures, expanding the horizon of regionalism as a field (Narlikar, 2016).

But regional tensions cannot be wiped out. They will emerge time and again, be they with other key actors advancing different conceptions of regional order or the distributional outcomes of policies. This was evident in Latin America and East Asia/Asia Pacific, where overlapping and competing regional projects emerged because participating states subscribed to quite different development models and/or were at very different levels of development. Much in the same way that we do not close our minds to analyse the United Nations or the EU when tensions emerge, tensions in regionalism in the developing world are just as legitimate and deserve the same treatment, in other words, explanation, not discarding into the waste paper basket of failed experiments.

Regions are a distinctive space of politics. Apart from any inherent interest in comparative regionalism to understand similarities and differences, the academic study of regionalism also needs to continue because regions now appear as a feature of global politics. At the same time, the soul-searching debates in the EU show that blemishes abound not only in the developing world. Such awareness has the potential to render the study of regionalism less Eurocentric and, hence, more explanatory of global regionalism.

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Essay 36: Key Concepts for Global Regionalism: Towards a Common Language for an Eclectic Field



Frank Mattheis

Introduction

The debate on Global International Relations has strongly advocated transcending the divide between Western and non-Western International Relations (IR) by focusing on the global origins and contributions of the key concepts in the discipline (International Studies Review, 2016). The conceptual pluralism advocated by Global IR thinking is particularly relevant to studying regionalism. Accordingly, Global Regionalism would entail not only including cases from the Global South in the study of regionalism but also globally applying concepts and theories derived from the non-Western context (Bilgin & Futák-Campbell, 2021). Such an approach challenges conventional thinking regarding regional integration and cooperation, which has been dominated by theorising the European experience of regional integration (Iroulo & Lenz, 2022). By capturing the complex and multidimensional features of regionalism processes around the world, global regionalism needs to transcend the lack of cross-fertilisation between IR and the various area studies. However, these multiple strands also pose a challenge for congruence. Depending on the setting and perspective, regionalisms can mean something different, and attempts to theorise regionalism have not overcome this fragmentation. The innovative power of global regionalism might precisely be due to the catch-all vagueness of the term, which enables it to be crafted without restraints. However, for analytical studies and comparative works, the blurriness can constitute a serious problem. If we want to analyse and compare regionalisms from a global perspective, we need to agree on what we are looking at and what we are looking for. Given the numerous fields and approaches of global regionalism, a plurality of meaningful definitions is inevitable within global regionalisms.

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_36

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It is, therefore, essential to be explicit about the features of regions and the derived term regionalism. Regionalism is multidimensional, and thus analytical and theoretical eclecticism is due, but in view of this fragmentation, this essay will seek to provide conceptual inroads as building blocks to advance a global approach without compromising coherence.

From Regions to Regionalisms

The difficulties start with the term region. Etymologically, regionalism refers to a theoretical dimension in producing a region. The Greek suffix *ismos* indicates an abstract noun, usually a doctrine or principle. But what does regionalism seek to produce? Geographically speaking, regions can range from entire continents (world regions) to small-scale cross-border areas. The borders of a region range from the imaginations of a socially and culturally cohesive territory (such as the Arab World) to a clearly demarcated administrative section (such as the Eurozone). The understanding of a region has been further subject to various material and constructivist concepts. In a material approach, a region is predefined by its tangible territorial conditions, revolving around physical distances and geographically imposed borders, such as mountains and seas (Chaliand et al., 1985). Constructivist perspectives, in turn, stress that regions are, above all, inventions and imaginations and are constantly subject to contestation and reconfigurations (Ruggie, 1993; Warleigh-Lack et al., 2011; Van Langenhove, 2011). As opposed to material understandings, the territorial scope is a result of this social process, rather than a prerequisite. Definitions of region are further complicated by the multitude of empirically expressed regionalisms with respect to their rules, their purpose and their functioning. In other words, regionalism can be understood as the project of building a region (De Lombaerde et al., 2010). Regionalisms can emerge and eventually replace existing ones that are facing a crisis. Some regionalisms fail, others prevail, but all continue to adapt and evolve. When dealing with the phenomenon of regionalism in the world, formal regional organisations tend to be at the centre of attention. However, treaty-based and centralised institutions are only one side of the story. As opposed to a rigid focus on organisation charts and signed agreements, a broader notion of regionalisms emphasises that both states and non-state actors engage in regional governance in formal and informal ways that are temporary and dynamic. In practice, regionalisms are rarely linear, continuous processes.

The Regional-Global Nexus

A second difficulty emanates from the global reference to the term global regionalism. It implies that regionalism is not only an inward-looking phenomenon. Regionalisms do not exist in isolation; they influence each other and embody a regional positioning

towards global governance processes (Hurrell, 2007). For instance, economically driven regionalisms are often conceived as an answer to the liberalisation of the world economy and its productive and financial flows. They aspire towards a regional form of sovereignty to cope with external market forces and enhance their weight in the global economic order by acting as a cohesive regional grouping. Regionalisms are thus not only political instruments but also actors in negotiating globalisation processes (Agnew, 2005; Brenner et al., 2003).

The Ambivalent Relationship Between Regions and States

This consideration points to the third difficulty, which is the relationship between regions and nation-states. While regions do not replace nation-states as dominant frameworks to establish control and sovereignty, they constitute a scale that different actors can employ either to reduce national sovereignty by creating supranational structures or to enhance national sovereignty by shielding the region from external influences (Haas, 1990). The concept of global regionalism seeks to capture governance reconfigurations, which occur through the demarcating and establishing of boundaries at the regional level (Telò, 2001). Political and social actors imagine and define regions as a spatial framework that coexists and interacts with globalisation processes (Hettne, 2006; Middell & Marung, 2019). Understanding regionalisms as a global pattern requires an ontology of the regional that is not a mere reproduction of national imperatives on another scale. A conceptualisation of global regionalism needs to go beyond territorial concerns and focus on the self-understanding of regionalism (Shaw et al., 2011). This approach allows to differentiate regionalisms according to their rationale, to whether their primary logic is expansive, confining or emerging. The first category (expansive) refers to regional organisations that have consolidated and seek territorial and functional expansion as well as global involvement. The second category (confining) pursues internal consolidation, while external relations are secondary. The third category (emerging) refers to interregional and transnational processes that cut across existing established regions and add an additional layer of regionalism. Despite this differentiation, there is still a clear distinction with nation-states in that regionalisms depart from the dogma of a determined territory and evolve in dynamics of diffuse spatialisation (Paasi et al., 2018). A region is not congruent with territory or sovereignty and can vary substantially according to the issues at stake. Security and environmental issues will have a distinct regional scope, even if they are intertwined and mutually constitutive. The economic production networks of a region tend to be concentrated in certain border regions or between economic centres. Thus, regionalism structures and actors emerge on the fringes (Mattheis et al., 2018). Remote areas remain parts of nation-states but are only marginal to the economic region.

Regions as Spaces

The concept of global regionalism needs to be able to deal with blurred shapes, especially when regions come into existence through informal modes of governance or non-state actors (Bøås et al., 2005). It needs to allow for a region to consist of superposing scales, each representing a different regionalism (Paasi, 2022). Such a superposition could then be read either in terms of core regions or in terms of regional junctures (Niemann, 2000). The first perspective focuses on where regionalisms act in concordance, while the latter emphasises how competing imaginations are being negotiated. Setting the region apart from other spatial imaginations, such as the nation-state, is, first and foremost, a matter of scale. In the broadest sense, a region refers to a space transcending national borders, no matter its territorial size. The region is either bound together by material flows (e.g. finance, trade, labour, infrastructure, production networks, etc.) and identities (e.g. history, culture, language, ethnicity), or it is being reshaped to develop such linkages. However, a region does not rely on the same ideational foundations and political structures as the nation-state. Established vehicles of power, such as political parties, bureaucracies, and armies, are deeply ingrained in the national frame. At the same time, a region can be set apart as a distinguishable space within broader defined notions such as global governance because of its foundation of inclusion and exclusion. It is often difficult to identify the range of actors that are involved, affected or benefiting in regionally defined areas. A spatial perspective on regionalism underlines the process of producing regions on a globally and locally interwoven scale. Social, political and economic actors are usually also embedded within a local environment, and their regional space might merely be a projection of interests originating at a different scale (Revel, 1996).

Global regionalisms initiate the production of such spaces and thus, by default, involve states or non-state actors, which decide to establish a form of community-building with their geographical neighbours or like-minded peers. The production of a region becomes tangible through cultural and social practices that accompany goods, ideas, and people in a definite area. These processes complement each other as states try to control such flows and as they are incited by their societies to act within a region. However, regions can also remain within a discursive expression. By bridging many of the preconceptions of region-building, global regionalism acknowledges a normative dimension about the shape, purpose and necessity of the conceived region (Söderbaum, 2016). The material substance of regionalism is, therefore, secondary to its scope. The concept of region accordingly needs to be understood as a cognitive entity that is produced by social actors. Regions are porous and undergo a constant reshaping (Katzenstein, 2005). Regional organisations might institutionalise some regional aspects but still rely on other actors to acknowledge the prevalence of a given regional project and provide legitimacy or even funding.

Such a concept of global regionalism follows the assumption that the dominant global structure rests on a particular capitalist duality of a global economy on one side and a fragmentation of the political sphere, conventionally in nation-states, on the other side. The spatial division of tax regimes, interest rates, labour standards,

education systems, exchange rates and subsidies is permeated by global flows of capital and commodities. A global super-state would undermine the foundations of this capitalist world system, and the proliferation of regionalisms reflects the search for an intermediate solution to this dilemma (Harvey, 2006; Wallerstein, 1974). Even though regions are still far away from replacing nations, their ascendancy propels the imagination of many actors. Unlike the nation-state that is contingent on existing contemporary social modes, regions entail the opportunity to construct new orders. Consequently, regionalisms reflect the contrasting and even conflictive productions of space (Lefebvre, 1974).

Space has often played a marginal role in the conceptualisation of regionalism (Engel, 2018). If not entirely neglected, space has been reduced to being an exogenous given. The most prevalent unit of analysis has been the nation-state, whose spatiality is seen as given and thus deemed negligible. Regional space is essentially referred to as a stage for states to act on, but the occurring events do not change the fixed and ahistorical stage itself. The marginalisation of space goes hand in hand with the categorisation of the state as a container.

Global regionalism offers an opportunity to understand the regional space as a result of social practices, where the region is perceived through its proximities, its connections and its patterns of dominance. The spatial imaginations of regionalist elites, expressed in regional ideologies and discourses, interact with how the regional space is experienced and lived by its inhabitants.

The Production of Regions

Global regionalisms exist as ideas and structures, and they are, at the same time, put into practice by the activities of regional actors. The consequent reshaping of material conditions and social patterns produces a space that nourishes new regional imaginations. This understanding transcends the lack of flexibility that occurs when theorising regions in a dichotomising manner. Regions materially exist, and integration occurs within them, but the creation of a regional organisation is often filled with misleading expectations that it will necessarily produce a region.

Global regionalisms emerge at two critical junctures. Firstly, they denote the translation between the overarching structures of regional possibilities and the conscious, experienced practices of regional actors. Secondly, global regionalisms occupy a key role in the representations of regional space. They are the discursive conditions for impositions of regional modes but also for counter-imaginings of a *conceived space*.

Through their global characteristic, regionalisms open up arenas for negotiation processes of reciprocal relations between spatial practices, imaginations and social modes. Regionalisms serve as a means of appropriation to create, shape and dominate regional spaces.

Dealing with Eurocentrism

Global regionalism also implies that no theory of African, European, Asian or Latin regionalism alone can explain regionalism as a global phenomenon. A major conundrum stems from relating to a field with an evident theoretical and empirical Eurocentric bias (Bilgin, 2008; Tickner, 2003; Tieku, 2022). However, an existing distortion in the field cannot be replaced by another distortion of the field. It can, however, be rebalanced by giving more room to innovations outside the dominant streams. These innovations instead possess the qualitative feature of giving a decisive impetus to the field by contesting and challenging dominant theoretical and empirical approaches. As the study of regional integration has originated around the European case, today, global regionalism needs to go beyond applying insights and concepts from the study of the European Union to other parts of the world (Deciancio, 2016). The dominance of one specific form of region-building distracts from the various particularities and alternatives of understanding and producing a region. For the concept of regionalism to be universally useful, it thus needs to be global. If the European experience is conceived to be a phenomenon as singular as any other, it must be located within a broader concept of regionalism. Such a concept needs to be broad enough to accommodate other existing and emerging regions (De Lombaerde, 2024). If the European experience were still treated as a unique phenomenon, the derived concept of regionalism would remain idiosyncratic and have little to offer for other regions.

A comprehensive concept of global regionalism must also consider that even though there might be several potential effects that carry a positive connotation, it is not positive *per se*. A regional project might cause detrimental unintended effects (Bach, 2015). Other regionalisms might simply not be designed to promote common regional welfare. Governance structures dominated by kleptocratic actors serve a purpose that does not coincide with a genuinely regional interest (Söderbaum & Taylor, 2003). It is an important task to uncover the involvement of various interest groups to understand why regionalism does not necessarily imply the provision of regional public goods. This should, however, not result in non-European regions being portrayed through a Eurocentric lens as deviations due to an alleged failure of region-building (Acharya et al., 2021). Comparisons with Europe are, of course, not useless or too difficult. However, given that it is neither the only comparator nor the only useful one, starting from somewhere else provides global regionalism with more freedom to strengthen new concepts before engaging with the European case (Fawcett & Gandois, 2010).

Conclusion

Taking into consideration all the previous considerations, how can the concept of global regionalism be meaningfully advanced? A key element is to expand theory-building by strengthening the position of non-European cases and not reducing them to a benchmark-oriented comparison with the European case (Acharya, 2014). Conceptualisations need to be able to grasp a wide gamut of shapes and aims of regionalism (Söderbaum, 2023). Regional organisations are set up to provide governance in a variety of areas, and the same applies to informal networks, which drive many of them. Uncovering regionalised areas and regionalising actors is thus more than a mere descriptive task. A global approach needs to shed light on the varieties of regionalism in a comprehensive manner. A central tool remains the comparative approach, which can not only point out similarities and differences but also point towards potential encompassing characteristics of regionalism as a global phenomenon (Balogun, 2021; Mattheis, 2017). The comparison of regional organisations in the Global South is thus not only an isolated research endeavour but also a crucial point of departure to uncover mechanisms at play globally.

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Essay 37: Potential and Challenges to Comparative Regionalism from a Global South Perspective



Bruno Theodoro Luciano and Haroldo Ramanzini Junior

Introduction

This essay explores the relevance and feasibility of comparative research on regionalism, highlighting its potential to advance both theoretical and empirical understandings of regional dynamics. We argue that comparative regionalism, with its focus on the agency of regional actors, the importance of autonomy, and the centrality of context and unique regional trajectories, offers a valuable framework that can engage with and incorporate theoretical insights from the EU and other area studies. In doing so, it challenges and transcends the Eurocentric foundations of this field. Such an approach is crucial for developing conceptual tools and comparative methodologies that account for the diverse regional experiences, particularly in the Global South.

Rather than dismissing the European case or endorsing absolute relativism, this essay advocates for meaningful inter-regional comparisons that enrich the study of regionalism. Specifically, we examine the Eurocentric origins of regionalism studies, rooted in European integration theories, and how these have evolved within the literature on comparative regionalism, particularly concerning the roles of states, regional institutions, and political leaders. We also underscore the need to broaden the scope of comparison beyond institutional dimensions, leadership performance, and trade and security agendas to include societal aspects, including civil society's role in regionalist processes. Furthermore, the rise of Global Regionalism reflects growing multidisciplinary contributions and the development of comprehensive databases and quantitative indices, underscoring the expanding scope and significance of this field.

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The Rise of the Comparative Regionalism Agenda

Comparative analyses to assess regionalism globally, commonly known as the comparative regionalism research agenda, have been used extensively over the past two decades. Börzel and Risse (2016, p. 622) describe it as a field of research that increasingly bridges area studies, comparative politics and international relations, drawing on deep historical and contextual knowledge and using comparative methods to make generalisations about the emergence and institutional design and effects of regionalism (Acharya & Johnston, 2007).

In this context, comparative regionalism is seen as a valuable approach to balancing the over-contextualisation of regional experiences with the over-generalisation of theoretical assumptions. It provides a mid-range theoretical and comparative framework that maintains a degree of abstraction while taking into account the specific contexts and timelines of different regions. By systematically analysing features such as institutional design and the effectiveness of regional organisations, comparative regionalism has made a significant contribution to understanding the similarities and differences between regional projects. This involves comparing institutions not only within the same continent or region but also across very different regions (Söderbaum, 2021).

Assuming that regionalism is a global phenomenon, theorising regionalism should contribute to explaining the fundamental characteristics of this phenomenon and its main effects. In this respect, the field of comparative regionalism (or the perspective of global regionalism) should not overlook contributing to a universal understanding of the phenomenon. This does not mean a one-size-fits-all analytical movement. It is necessary to develop analytical models that take into account the specificities and agency of regions, but that can be adapted to different types of processes. Otherwise, as an epistemic community, we may lose the ability to understand and explain the phenomenon.

Although rooted in the New Regionalism agenda of the 1990s, the development of research that takes comparative regionalism as a more systematic approach dates from the last twenty years, if we take the establishment of the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS) in 2001 and Acharya's (2012) work as key institutional and research milestones in this regard. In this vein, it has been argued that aspects such as institutional structure and the actions of regional leaders have strongly influenced the outcomes of regionalism. Furthermore, the development of research on comparative regionalism has helped to enrich the discussion on key concepts, such as the notion of *paymaster* (Mattli, 1999). In the Global South, it is difficult even for a regional leader to pay the economic-financial costs of integration and to meet the expectations of neighbours in this respect. This poses additional challenges for the (re)distribution of the benefits of regionalism.

One needs to pay attention to the fact that part of the analysis of regionalism and global change processes is permeated with the strong normativity of what is desired by one as the preferred outcome. In the case of regionalism studies, what is

problematic is to consider one case as a model for the others or to build theories and conceptual approaches based on just one case, such as the EU. This is a problem for IR as a global discipline (Acharya, 2014) since the failure to consider and include Global South perspectives and experiences in a systematic way impoverishes our collective ability to understand the phenomenon of regionalism.

In this essay, we aim to discuss how relevant and feasible comparative research on regionalism is. We emphasise that the question of the agency of regional actors, the emphasis on the dimension of autonomy and the centrality of aspects such as context and specific regional trajectories, emphasised by the perspective of comparative regionalism, can dialogue with and incorporate theoretical aspects developed within the framework of EU studies, surpassing at the same time the Eurocentric foundations of this field of study. This is a critical step in the effort to advance the conceptual and comparative dimension of regionalism for the empirical analysis of regional dynamics in the Global South. In other words, it is not a question of a priori rejecting the European case or of defending an absolute relativism of any process of regionalism, but rather of encouraging comparisons between regions (inter-regional comparisons) and the construction of conceptual tools based on the analysis of different cases.

Thus, global regionalism needs to be grounded and built on cases of regionalisms in both the Global South and North. This implies considering the constitutive heterogeneity of the phenomenon, but also understanding it from a scientific point of view. In this sense, we should not exclusively incorporate theories according to their institutional or geographic origin but rather according to their scientific consistency and potential to contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon. This perspective may encourage a more open and merit-based approach to theoretical and conceptual applicability, avoiding the biases associated with mainstream approaches to assessing geographies and institutions. In order to move forward, it is necessary to agree on some conceptual definitions. It is well established that regionalism is not the same as regional integration, as integration implies a loss of sovereignty (Acharya, 2012). The application of a typology by Mariano et al. (2021), ranging from regional consultation to cooperation and integration in the Americas, is illustrative in this regard and may contribute to what Closa (2015) refers to as *mainstreaming regionalism*.

In particular, we reflect on the Eurocentric foundations of regionalism studies based on the literature and theories of European integration. We also examine how these have been reshaped in the literature on comparative regionalism, especially the question of the role of states, regional institutions and political leaders. At the same time, we stress that much of the literature has focused on comparing the institutional dimension, the performance of regional leaders, and trade and security agendas, in addition to the existence of other dimensions of comparison, such as the involvement of civil society in regionalist processes. Furthermore, Global Regionalism has gained relevance through the development of more multidisciplinary contributions as well

as the creation of databases to catalogue and produce more quantitative indexes on regional initiatives globally.¹

Overcoming the Eurocentrism of Comparative Regionalism

In the 2000s, theories surrounding European integration faced increasing scrutiny. For instance, prevailing ethnocentrism in the social sciences has inevitably influenced the study of regionalism from its inception. Consequently, *Western* concepts, theories, and research programs have traditionally been overemphasised by regionalist scholars (Acharya, 2016). The European case, in particular, remains the most studied regionalist example globally (Schimmelfennig, 2016). As a result, the EU is often seen as “the paradigmatic case of regionalism” and serves as a model for understanding other regional organisations worldwide (Börzel & Risse, 2016). In this sense, Acharya (2012, 2016) highlighted the euro- or EU-centrism prevalent in regional integration theories and comparative regionalism studies. Similarly, Hurrell (2007, p. 39) noted that the study of comparative regionalism has been hindered by the so-called regionalism theories, which are often just European experiences translated into abstract theoretical language.

Although Acharya (2012) argued that the time has come for comparative regionalism as a field of study, the publication of the *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism* (2016), edited by Börzel and Risse, significantly increased the field’s visibility (541 citations according to Google Scholar and 18,817 total views—including page views and downloads since 2022 according to the publisher’s metrics). In fact, the comparative regionalism agenda should not assume that neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism are universally applicable approaches. Unlike conceptualisations derived from the European regionalist experience, comparative regionalism does not view regionalism as dependent on the transfer of state sovereignty but instead emphasises the development of more contextual and systematic parameters for comparing regional cases (Börzel & Risse, 2016; Fioramonti & Mattheis, 2016; Ramanzini Junior & Luciano, 2018).

Contemporary scholars, however, are rethinking how regionalism is conceived and studied. As Söderbaum (2015, p. 12) suggests, “rethinking regionalism implies escaping Eurocentrism and anti-Eurocentrism and, instead, inserting theories of European integration into a comparative perspective while maintaining cultural sensitivity.” This means that the EU is not viewed as a unique model for other regions but as a comparable case of regionalism. Despite its deeper integration and institutionalisation, comparing the EU with other regional experiences around the world can

¹ Relevant examples of databases linked to the comparative regionalism agenda include the Comparative Regional Organisations Project (CROP), available at: <https://comparativeregionalorganizations.org/about-crop-1>; and the Regional Integration Knowledge System (RIKS), available at: <https://riks.cris.unu.edu/ria-database>.

provide valuable insights into regionalism as a global phenomenon, acknowledging the diversity of contexts in which it occurs.

One particularly relevant aspect of this agenda, as proposed by Acharya (2012), which has also been present in Parthenay's (2018) sociological perspective and Lopez-Lucia's (2019) socio-political approach, is the concept of Global International Relations, described as the perspective of scholars worldwide seeking their voices and re-examining their own traditions, charting a path towards a truly global and inclusive discipline that acknowledges its multiple and diverse foundations (Acharya, 2014, p. 647).

Comparative Regionalism from and to the Global South

Global Regionalism cannot exist without a substantial increase in the number and quality of regionalist studies from and to the Global South (Balogun, 2021). Developing comparative regionalism studies from a Global South standpoint by emphasising the relevance of non-Western regional experiences can strengthen the academic foundations of comparative regionalism as a research agenda. Including regional cases from the Global South in research is essential to ensure the external validity and representativeness of generalisations made by regionalists. Without considering non-Western experiences, academic knowledge cannot genuinely be regarded as *global* and *universal* despite common claims to the contrary. Comparing regional organisations is thus a viable way to apply theoretical assumptions to diverse empirical realities, adjusting analytical categories to ensure relevance across a broad range of cases (Vullers, 2014).

On the other hand, the comparative regionalism agenda for the Global South must avoid viewing regional case studies as isolated and niche phenomena. Regional organisations do not exist in a vacuum; they are inherently influenced by and connected to their external environment, shaping and being shaped by other international and regional processes. An extensive literature on norm diffusion highlights the interaction between regional projects, particularly Europe's normative power and its global impact (Manners, 2002; Whitman, 2013; Lenz, 2013; Börzel & Risse, 2016). Thus, the comparative regionalism agenda must acknowledge that regional cases are interconnected and incorporate the role of norms and rule diffusion mechanisms in its analyses.

Furthermore, when analysing regionalism in the Global South, it becomes clear that the motivation for regional integration or cooperation is not to replace the state with a supranational entity. Similarly, the advancement of cooperation does not occur through alliances between interested economic actors and a supranational bureaucracy, as neofunctionalism would suggest. Hooghe and Marks (2019) suggest, from a neofunctionalist perspective, that regional integration progresses when groups within states believe that supranational institutions promote their interests better than national institutions. However, this dynamic has rarely been observed empirically in the Global South. Rather than being driven by supranational institutions, the progress

of regionalism in the South has depended on the political momentum of governments and relevant domestic actors who have seen their goals achieved through regionalism.

What is more, the few studies that evaluate regionalism processes in different parts of the non-Western world often focus on specific cases (Farrell et al., 2005) without establishing a common comparative framework. Even the volume by Engel et al. (2017), which analyses the emergence, trajectories, and outcomes of regionalism from a Global South perspective, lacks a systematic analytical framework for comparing these issues or specific agendas across different cases. The authors proposed a global perspective on regionalism in the Global South, viewing each regional project not as an idiosyncrasy but as manifestations of a global phenomenon that vary in terms of main actors, objectives, and counterparts (Engel et al., 2017, p. 9). In light of that, our previous research aimed to contribute to that debate by proposing a comparative analytical framework to identify and explain the similarities and differences between two regional organisations outside Europe, namely in Africa and South America, specifying certain analytical parameters for comparing regional organisations, and providing new empirical knowledge about the evaluated institutions (Ramanzini Junior & Luciano, 2020). More recently, an edited volume also intended to move in this direction by focusing on collecting comparative assessments of the performance of Regionalism in the Global South, besides introducing a common framework focused on orientations (process or outcome-based) and levels (micro, intermediate, and macro) of performance (Muntschick & Plank, 2025).

It is also important to distinguish between rhetorical and practical/functional versions of regionalism. In the Global South, this rhetorical (Söderbaum & Brolin, 2016) or declaratory (Jenne et al., 2017) nature is very common. This in itself is a relevant aspect to be promoted as a discursive/normative construction, but it has several limitations in terms of its translation into effective regional policies (Mariano et al., 2021). However, one can verify a process of change towards a more pragmatic or functional regionalism that has been more directly linked to the needs of the population, whether in terms of access to public services in the member countries and the recognition of university degrees or in terms of efforts to integrate infrastructure and border cooperation. One of the difficulties in expanding these regional policies in the Global South, though, is the challenges in involving societies, as regionalism in the Global South remains very much centred in the political-diplomatic sphere. In this respect, regionalist initiatives should invest in agendas and issues that allow for the expansion of this societal connection at the regional level. What is more, and normatively speaking, regionalism and the socialisation of regional practices can help to build an overarching consensus on complex issues that could be better addressed multilaterally at a later stage, such as disarmament, the environment, health, migration, and the fight against transnational crime, among others.

Although historical efforts at regional cooperation on trade and security are well known, this practical/functional agenda has gained momentum in recent years. Regional infrastructure integration is a case in point. There are also new regional cooperation initiatives emerging in the environmental agenda, as well as efforts on other pressing agendas, such as the supply of critical raw minerals. The Global South possesses significant quantities of strategic minerals such as copper, graphite, lithium,

cobalt and nickel, which are essential for the energy transition. Working together on such agendas can strengthen regionalism and leverage states' capacity to develop technologies to increase their role in specific value chains.

Last but not least, the influence of external powers such as the EU and the US on regionalism in the Global South is well documented (Gardini, 2021; Lopez-Lucia & Mattheis, 2021; Luciano & Mesquita, 2022). However, while the impact of relations with China on regionalism in the Global South has received increased attention, it still requires further research. If, on the commercial side, the relationship is not primarily articulated from a regionalist perspective and does not necessarily generate incentives to strengthen regionalism on other agendas, such as infrastructure integration, Chinese financing has shown greater potential to advance significant projects of regional interconnectivity. The same can be said of improving the use of technologies for the sustainable extraction of critical minerals despite the existence of a number of caveats.

Conclusion

Given that regionalism is a global phenomenon, theorising regionalism should contribute to explaining the fundamental characteristics of this phenomenon and its main effects. In this regard, the field of comparative regionalism (or the perspective of global regionalism) needs to be grounded and built on cases of regionalism in both the global South and North. Although this is not automatically achieved, the research agenda on regionalism needs to overcome its Eurocentric foundations.

On balance, as we have argued, Global Regionalism cannot exist without a substantial increase in the number and quality of regionalist studies from and about the Global South. The regionalist experiences of the South are also part of the phenomenon of global regionalism, and including these dynamics in the analysis is a fundamental step towards expanding the explanatory scope, the analytical potential, and, ultimately, the construction of a genuine global regionalism agenda. In this endeavour, analytical models should capture aspects of agency and how patterns of interaction between the domestic, regional and global levels evolve and interact over time. Another relevant aspect is the role of extra-regional actors (powers) along with global geopolitical developments. In this respect, new studies have focused on creating global databases, monitoring new agendas and realities, bringing more sensitivity to new issues, new actors and other regions of the Global South, as well as South-South influences (the example of China's influence in the South being the most emblematic). In terms of approaches, there is a growing concern with measuring the performance of regionalist efforts, going beyond the institutional and normative dimensions of regionalism.

At the same time, the contributions of recent years show that there are important differences between and within regions in how states and domestic actors conceive of regionalism as a sphere in which they can advance their political, economic and social interests. There are also differences in the roles that states seek to play in the

world and in the ways in which regionalism does—or does not—align with these conceptions. State fragility, patterns of engagement with the global economy and limited capacity to increase regional economic interdependence are some of the well-known challenges that limit the emergence, design and functioning of regional institutions in the Global South. In addition, it is interesting to note that in the Global South, autonomy serves to shape regional institutions. However, this very autonomy is one of the factors that hinder their institutional development. These aspects, as well as the continuous effort to build a comparative analysis, should be taken into account to ensure the external validity and representativeness of the generalisations made by the research agenda.

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Essay 38: Epistemic Bridges: Understanding and Comparing Regionalisms Through Ideas



Juan Paz Berru

Introduction

International Relations (IR) has been a discipline that has gradually developed its own theoretical framework, separating it from political science and becoming recognised as a social science in itself. Among its first debates, realism and liberalism can be found, which have contributed a lot to international thought and to different areas of it, such as the establishment of peace and the possibilities of cooperation and integration, among others. What should be mentioned is that these paradigms are very rationalist in their way of theorising their postulates, and with the arrival of constructivism and critical theories, this type of reasoning has been debated in depth, showing that its postulates are not always the most appropriate to explain international reality. In this sense, the academic debate was enriched, and today, a series of theoretical proposals for international political analysis can be found. However, this broadening of the understanding of the *international* was not enough since authors such as Acharya (2014) identified that much of what had been developed until then was very Eurocentric and that International Relations should be global if this social science wants to be understood in depth. This is how Global IR was born, and since its formulation, a series of efforts have been made to get away from this Eurocentrism.

With the end of the Cold War, a great opportunity for this type of study opened up, as authors such as Hurrell (1995) identified that the end of the bipolar era would bring a world of regions. That is, an international world where regionalisms would be the protagonists in this era. This would be challenging, but at the same time, an opportunity to study international political phenomena beyond the European one and, with them, achieve that IR become truly global. What is identified in this sense is that global regionalisms are an opportunity to broaden the awareness of what

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regionalisms are, and not so much of what they *should* be in light of the European experience.

However, the Global Regionalisms Project poses two major challenges for its implementation. The first already existed within the debates on regionalisms: the extensive number of definitions of this problem and the difficulty of establishing comparative methods (De Lombaerde et al., 2010). That is, many authors have defined regionalisms in different ways, and conducting a comparative study was already challenging due to the number of questions that must be answered to justify this type of study. The second challenge has to do with the idea of *global*, which is the one being proposed now. Regionalism is already complex to study; studying it globally makes it even more challenging, as it requires rethinking many of the concepts and theories already developed to extract new theoretical postulates from regions. In other words, it is a critical exercise to question what has already been developed in IR with a view to complementing existing theoretical tools.

Aware of this, the following essay seeks to overcome these challenges by developing a common/shared theoretical toolbox that can be used in comparative regionalisms. It should be mentioned that the argument presented below is situated within constructivism in IR. The reason for this choice is that regionalisms display a very high cognitive load in their formation, constitution, and development. Therefore, if one wishes to advance toward a comprehensive understanding of these, the validity of this knowledge for theoretical construction must be argued. That is, a theoretical justification must be provided for why the experiences of marginalised regions must be taken into account in the construction of theories of regionalisms.

To this end, the essay will be divided into three parts. The first will offer a definition of regionalisms that can answer the question of epistemic validity in the construction of knowledge. In this way, the general objective of studying regionalisms in a global way will be justified. The second part will present a comparative proposal. The objective of this section is to identify general variables that can guide comparative studies. Finally, some conclusions will be presented on the contributions of this essay to global regionalisms.

Defining Regionalisms

The efforts to study IR globally opened a great opportunity to begin articulating the different contributions of regions to IR theories. However, this ambitious project requires a theoretical justification that goes beyond the European bias identified in IR theorising. In other words, the inclusion of global experiences in the theoretical construction of the discipline must have some theoretical basis that can demonstrate the usefulness of this exercise. In the case of regionalisms, it is necessary to evaluate what they are and how their conceptualisation helps understand the global purpose that can be given to them. In other words, what do regionalisms offer that makes them worthy of being studied globally? To answer this question, the term must first be conceptualised.

For this purpose, Börzel and Risse (2016) “define regionalism as constituting a primarily state-led process of building and sustaining formal regional institutions and organisations among at least three states (in most cases, as stated before)” (p. 27). It must be added that the outcome of these regional organisations will depend largely on their institutional design. That is, at higher levels of grouping and delegation, they will tend to be regional organisations that seek integration initiatives, but at lower levels, they will carry out cooperation processes (Lenz & Marks, 2016).

Based on this conceptualisation, the theories that explain these phenomena can be classified into two large groups. The first consists of the more classic approaches to the discipline, such as functionalism, neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, and others. These are linked to a very rationalist approach typical of realism and liberalism. The second group is more critical and reflexive, encompassing critical theories and constructivism. A major difference between the two lies in their conception of region. For the first group, this is largely a given, while for the second, it is socially constructed (Söderbaum, 2012).

This difference is important because the construction of regions is driven not only by political and economic interests but also by epistemic dynamics. In Adler’s words (2017), cognitive regions are built from a mutual understanding of something. That is, these cognitive entities end up being the result of collective epistemic processes where certain problems have a certain type of resolution as long as they are understood as such. Consequently, heuristic understandings of what reality is in a common way are created, which ends up consolidating a cognitive region. However, it is worth remembering that regionalisms occur within regions, so the question arises as to whether these processes have any epistemic component. And if the answer is positive, then it must be proven.

For this, institutional epistemology is useful since regionalisms have been an important focus of the study of institutions. According to Goldman (2019), Institutional epistemology can be defined as the branch of epistemological studies that focuses on investigating how institutions allow subjects to approach a certain reality (knowledge). This means that institutions, by shaping social life and involving those within them, allow reality to be understood through this interaction. For example, justice systems do not necessarily produce studies on what justice is and communicate this to the population, but their very functioning should bring people closer to the concept of justice. In this way, institutions play an epistemic role in society, bringing their actors closer to certain concepts of social life.

Just as institutions shape social life and bring actors closer to certain concepts, regionalisms, through their institutional design and processes, create and reinforce shared understandings and knowledge about the region. As these regionalisms develop, their epistemic foundations become more ingrained, influencing the perceptions and behaviours of the actors involved. Therefore, following the reasoning of institutional epistemology, it can be affirmed that regionalisms have an epistemic component.

Let’s take the Pacific Alliance as an example. The Pacific Alliance is an integration project with an informal institutional design. This makes it very different from traditional organisations that pursued integration in a more orthodox manner and for

a reason. The formation of the Pacific Alliance resulted from a convergence of ideas among the actors who created it because it was believed that this would achieve its goal (epistemic process). The actors who participated in its creation conceived it this way due to epistemic convergences they shared among themselves (Castro Silva, 2023).

Based on this example, one can see the importance of epistemic factors (knowledge and ideas) in the construction of regionalisms and their development. As a complement, Wendt (1999) defines ideas as constructions that emerge through interaction and communication between actors, and that ultimately form international social reality. With this in mind, regionalisms can be defined as epistemic processes that shape politics and economics within a region. This means that there is a very significant cognitive burden in the different regionalisms throughout history and around the world. The question then becomes: Why should this knowledge be taken into account in the theoretical formation of regionalisms, beyond its historical exclusion from the discipline?

To this end, market epistemology offers an interesting rationale for answering this question. Hayek (1945) argued that knowledge is dispersed throughout society and that each actor possesses only a small amount of it. He called this *localised knowledge*. To ensure its efficient use in decision-making, conditions of free interaction are necessary for information to flow smoothly.

For example, market prices are a good way to illustrate this. When a value is assigned to a product, it must be defined through the free interaction of the seller and the person who wishes to purchase it. If both reach an agreement on the value of the commodity, then the true value of that product emerges. However, if a value is imposed on it, it is obstructed, and with it, the optimal functioning of the institution (the market).

This reasoning is very interesting when applied to global regionalisms in the following way. By understanding regionalisms as cognitive processes, it can be asserted that they contain situated knowledge. Following Hayek (1945), no regionalism can possess all the knowledge to be the model for the entire world to follow. Therefore, the European Union cannot be the central model for regionalism studies, as it has been in much of the literature already developed, which has generated a bias already highlighted by authors such as Acharya (2014). In contrast, by accepting that knowledge is dispersed and that other processes have valid cognitive loads, a comprehensive study of regionalisms is not only valid but also necessary for a better understanding of this discipline.

Comparing Regionalisms: A Proposal

One of the ways to study them has been comparative regionalisms. Comparative regionalisms are complex and present many challenges. Hameiri (2013) identifies a very important one that arises when studying them. While many definitions use the word *process* to define regionalisms, sometimes, when comparing them, it seems as

if only regional organisations are being compared. This problem ultimately impacts the difficulty of comparing regionalisms due to their differences. To overcome this problem, Hameiri (2013) proposes comparing regionalisms through the conditions of possibility that allow them to develop. That is, meta-theoretical elements that explain their formation and maintenance according to the subject being studied.

The first thing to recognise is that regionalisms are historical products (Fawcett, 2005). This idea places regionalisms in a moment in history and demonstrates that their characteristics are largely due to historical conditions. In this sense, an interpretation must be given to what is meant by history in terms of the constitution of regionalisms. Reus-Smit (2002) postulates that history can be understood as a history of ideas, where communities have been changing and organising social life depending on what was believed in their contexts. In that sense, history is no longer an accumulation of facts but a reconstruction of ideas that have shaped the lives of communities in certain contexts. Thus, it is evident that the first step is a historical contextualisation based on the major paradigms of thought of that time.

Now, after identifying this, it is necessary to locate where the regionalism to be studied and compared developed. This location should be based on Wallerstein's world system proposal (1974). This is because knowledge, no matter how global it may be due to the major existing paradigms, is interpreted differently depending on where the regionalisms are located. For example, the African international political economy has been conceived in terms of external debt, while the Latin American international political economy has been conceived in terms of structural dependency. Although both are peripheral regions with similar needs, the way their development is processed has certain differences.

Finally, actors must be evaluated, as they are the ones who create, maintain, and change regionalisms. Their importance lies in their ownership of localised knowledge, which is then embodied in the institutions they build (Adler, 2019; Hayek, 1945). This can be most clearly explained within the cognitive evolutionary theory of IR. Adler (2019) argues that world orders are sustained by practices shaped by prior knowledge linked to them, whose vehicles are the communities of practice. The premise of this theory is that the cognitive (epistemic) is social, and the social shapes the cognitive. Consequently, Adler (2019) finds a cognitive, not teleological, evolution in the development of world orders. That is, the cognitive evolves as it advances by colliding with new ways of understanding the world that come from these world orders. Therefore, the changes and stability of world orders depend on the meta-stability of this set of ideas in force in the communities of practice, which are ultimately those that emulate the behaviours of the subjects.

Although this theory was conceived to explain world orders, the author invites us to consider them in relation to other phenomena of IR. Therefore, regionalisms can be evaluated under the concept of communities of practice. The reasoning is the same: actors constitute these communities of practice, which can be regionalisms. In this way, actors are given direct agency when creating these processes. The change or continuation of regionalisms will depend on the formation of communities of practice, since when meta-epistemic foundations are questioned, there is the possibility of change (Adler, 2019).

In this way, a three-level comparative model could be constructed. The first is contextual, explaining the historical moment in which regionalism developed. The second is interpretive because by locating the process within the world system, it is possible to demonstrate how ideas are being understood based on regional needs. Finally, there is the executive level, which focuses on the actors and how they implement regionalisms.

Conclusion

This essay attempts to build a common/shared theoretical toolbox for the analysis of global regionalisms. To this end, a definition of regionalisms as cognitive processes has been offered, which has allowed for the introduction of institutional epistemology into the debates on regionalism. This is considered a major contribution because it complements the literature developed in global IR, providing a theoretical justification for the usefulness of this type of study in the production of knowledge. Likewise, institutional epistemology allows us to understand regionalisms from an epistemic perspective that goes beyond the production of knowledge, as epistemic communities do. Understanding regionalisms epistemically presupposes an understanding of the effects that institutions have on shaping the social reality of their actors. That is, their very existence and functioning tend to develop unconscious approaches to certain concepts, which end up being the product of preconceived ideas at the time of their creation. In this way, the epistemic importance of regionalisms is evident due to their cognitive load, thus highlighting the importance of studying them globally through the concept of localised knowledge.

This allows new forms of regionalisms to be taken seriously and not dismissed as erroneous practices or ideologies. For example, the debate about whether dependency theory should be considered a serious conceptual framework or merely an ideological manifestation is resolved by applying the reasoning explained in this paper. Critical proposals regarding regionalisms can thus be taken into account in the production of knowledge, and differences can ultimately be appreciated conceptually.

Following this, a model has been proposed to compare regionalisms based on three levels (contextual, interpretive, and executive). The objective of defining it in epistemic terms lies in the fact that the applied logic of institutional epistemology is equally valid for the comparative method. Although very general, this was done intentionally to leave broad categories of study that researchers decide how to delimit according to their case studies. In conclusion, this essay contributes to global regionalisms as a research project, justifying its objective and attempting to overcome the typical problems encountered when comparing regionalisms.

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Essay 39: How Do Regional Organisations Contribute to the Shaping of Regional Epistemic Communities? An Invitation for Further Research



Kevin S. Parthenay

Introduction

In 1992, epistemic communities as an object of research were given their definition by Peter Haas. He defines them as “a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area” (Haas, 1992, p. 3). They bring together professionals from different disciplines, but whose members share (1) a set of normative beliefs and principles that provide a basis for action; (2) causal beliefs about the origin of the problem and the solutions to it; (3) criteria for the validity of the knowledge involved in addressing the issue; and finally (4) proposals for public action based on common practices associated with the problem that is the subject of their expertise (Haas, 1992).

Up until now, this notion has been used mainly to determine the influence of individuals or expert organisations on decision-making. In these different registers, we find recurring questions concerning how epistemic communities help decision-makers learn, or the influence of knowledge-based experts in international policy making, or the role of transnational experts in fostering international policy coordination. These epistemic communities are present at both national and international levels, and an extensive academic literature has been produced on their transnational dimension.

However, less attention has been paid to the regional level. This essay sets out the reasons why this phenomenon has been understudied and why it should be the subject of further investment. In 2013, twenty years after the notion was introduced, M.K.D. Cross indicated that epistemic communities had a “growing importance (...) in an increasingly globalised world” (2013, p. 138), and this echoed the rise of

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_39

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global governance. Today, new realities are challenging the notion of the epistemic community, particularly on a regional scale, for several reasons. Firstly, there has been a rise in the number of regional actors in every world region. Secondly, there is a rise of expertise and expert authority as resources. Thirdly, there is international reordering around the regions in the context of polycrisis (economic, health, climate, etc.). At the time of the rise of international organisations, the notion of epistemic community had been useful in understanding how these new IR actors were asserting themselves. Thus, it is useful to transpose the gaze towards regions and regional organisations, and the way in which they, in turn, shape epistemic communities.

The essay is organised as follows: I present first regional epistemic communities as an understudied object, mainly due to methodological difficulties. Then I look at how regional organisations can shape epistemic communities, while the subsequent section extends the reflection by establishing the theoretical and empirical reasons why a consolidation of the study of this notion applied to the regional scale is necessary.

Regional Epistemic Communities: Under-Studied Object and Methodological Complexities

Generally speaking, epistemic communities have been studied in international relations to describe transnational cooperation and networks, but they have been little used to study regionalisms. This chapter is an invitation to fill this gap.

An Under-Examined Object

Integrated into transnational chains, regional actors have traditionally been a mere link in this logic. Nevertheless, “the concept’s analytical leverage is founded on the potentially powerful role experts and knowledge can play in overcoming collective action dilemmas in uncertain contexts regardless of jurisdiction and government level” (Dunlop, 2012, p. 6). However, there are a few works that base their research on epistemic communities that are specifically regional. These include three specific perspectives.

The first perspective concerns the influence of epistemic communities on the models of regional integration and institutional choices. Mercedes Botto explains, with regard to the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), that neo-liberal governments made the paradoxical choice of deep integration, through the desire to create a common market (as opposed to a simple free-trade zone) based on the European model (Botto, 2009). This choice was due to the influence of an epistemic community made up of research institutes, academics, and bureaucrats themselves under the influence of the European Union. Botto describes a model in which the EU has skilfully

promoted an epistemic community in order to facilitate the spread of its integration model. In a similar vein, Acharya highlights the role of epistemic communities in defining institutional choices in the Asia–Pacific region (Acharya, 2011). He demonstrates that epistemic communities, through three mechanisms (*policy innovation, constitutive localisation, and legitimisation*), can influence regional orientations. In particular, he cites the example of a group of Japanese and Australian academics and think-tanks who shaped the idea of a *Pacific Community*. Similarly, he highlights the role of Indonesian academics and think-tanks in shaping the ASEAN Security Community (Acharya, 2011, p. 14).

The second perspective concerns the influence that epistemic communities can exert on the consolidation or change of regional hierarchical orders. Björn Jerdén demonstrates “the role of an epistemic community of security experts in sustaining the remarkably persistent East Asian support for the region’s hierarchical international order led by the non-regional US” (Jerdén, 2017, p. 495). He explains that the power of knowledge and expertise favours the assertion of an expert authority (epistemic authority) that can be translated into political decisions taken by state representatives. Jerdén demonstrates that by creating knowledge and beliefs, an epistemic community—made up of academics, former senior civil servants, bureaucrats, and journalists from several countries—has succeeded in consolidating the discourse of “stability.” States have integrated this “stability belief,” making the US-dominated hierarchical order in the Asia–Pacific region highly resilient. Thus, he argues that epistemic communities are not always and necessarily producers of policy change but can also help to maintain existing arrangements through a legitimising effect (idem, p. 503).

Thirdly, epistemic communities have been studied for their influence on the dynamics of regional construction. Musial and Šime (2021) examined the link between regional construction and scientific councils, highlighting the central role of expertise (science-based or evidence-informed policymaking) as an instrument of regional cooperation. They argue that “epistemic communities have exploited windows of opportunity offered by critical junctures to enter the policymaking arena and infused the legal and institutional fabric of region-building processes with scientific rationality” (p. 484). They explain that in periods of crisis or high uncertainty (*critical junctures*), epistemic communities can contribute to *region-building* by framing issues and rationalising them.

While we know regional epistemic communities may have an impact on institutional choices, regional hierarchical orders, and cooperation, none of these works have studied the question of the formation of those epistemic communities. Through this series of works on regional epistemic communities, we can better identify the reasons why this object has remained understudied. Firstly, it is an object that is part of a particular approach to international relations, at the crossroads of transnationalism and constructivism, and has thus developed belatedly. Epistemic communities are directly in line with a logic of broadening the range of actors involved in international relations, as are the *communities of practice* that have received increased attention in recent times (Adler et al., 2024; Glas, 2022; Tieku & Yakohene, 2024). Secondly, as suggested by the works presented, their methods and authors’ analyses

enable us to examine the role or influence of epistemic communities, which involves long-term work that goes beyond formal institutional aspects. They also demand the mobilisation of sociological empirical material (such as individuals and their ideas or beliefs), which is often difficult to access, as well as the tracing of complex socio-political dynamics (e.g., decision-making processes). It is often necessary to know who the experts are, how they circulate, and what their professional trajectories are, as well as to reinsert this knowledge into more general institutional analyses. Thirdly, epistemic communities are porous, shifting and highly heterogeneous, and can only be detected over time due to the intensity of national-regional-international circulation.

Epistemological and Methodological Complexities

These elements, which have helped pave the way for epistemic communities to be used to analyse regional dynamics, raise epistemological and methodological challenges.

Epistemologically, ROs are considered more than the product of formal institutions but are understood as places where the emergence of a regional political space can be examined, along with a multiplicity of actors and complex configurations of interactions. In fact, ROs are not byproducts of high-level political decisions or cold bureaucratic bodies subordinated to their guardians. They are social orders within which a plurality of actors develop multiple patterns of interactions and practices, according to different frameworks of representations and prescribed roles (Parthenay, 2019, p. 67). Those interaction orders are observable through a relational approach and a focus on practices (Adler & Pouliot, 2011). In this respect, this epistemological posture is highly complementary to institutionalist work, particularly its rationalist version, which has largely predominated in studies of regionalisms and regional organisations, and which focuses mainly on the study of their genesis, development, and effects. Since we know that norms and institutions do not exist without the actors who use them (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010) and that those actors adapt to the different interaction orders that may exist in organisational settings (Goffman, 1973), the study of ROs beneath this *institutionalist surface* enables capturing social dynamics such as the formation of communities or status groups (Weber, 1978) based on knowledges, expertise, and/or know-hows. Therefore, ROs might well be cradles for regional epistemic communities, but the academic literature has not clarified that question mainly due to methodological purposes.

In fact, from a methodological point of view, access to the individuals and the ideas they produce is paramount to studying epistemic communities. This kind of research, with its strong sociological and sometimes ethnographic content, can be complicated. As Dunlop points out, “practical obstacles, such as identifying, locating, and gaining access to those believed to be members of an epistemic community, may frustrate attempts to engage with the approach as an analytical tool” (Dunlop, 2012, p. 4). In ROs, this work is not made any easier; on the contrary, organisations

and their agents are often difficult to access. Because of the nature of the activities involved, the RO is a professional environment that is relatively closed to outsiders, as it is highly concentrated around a core of interactions between member states, regional bureaucracies and extra-regional donors. Furthermore, ROs are very close to the executive powers and are therefore keen to maintain a certain reserve with regard to the subjects they deal with or the relations they maintain with the various stakeholders in regional cooperation. Overzealousness or effective pressure from governments often means that the arrival of an outsider, especially a researcher, is viewed at best with suspicion and at worst with concern. It is also difficult to gain access to individuals, their trajectories, their ideas, and their belief systems, unless you invest a lot of time. The study of regional epistemic communities, therefore, requires a long-term investment in research.

Consequently, as epistemic communities have been largely overlooked at the regional level and ROs often pose obstacles to more sociological investigations, the question of how ROs can shape epistemic communities remains unanswered.

How Can Regional Organisations Possibly Shape Epistemic Communities?

The innovative nature of this question is to reverse the traditional logic that tends to study the role of epistemic communities on regional organisations, regionalism, or region-building (Acharya, 2011; Nair, 2009; Jerdén, 2017; Musial & Sime, 2021), namely, how regional organisations can contribute to forging epistemic communities. Those epistemic communities have mainly been studied because they underpin specific government policies or shape governance more broadly, but less frequently, on how they can be shaped. The question aims to observe how regional organisations serve as vectors for the formation and consolidation of epistemic communities. Based on the definition proposed by Haas, these communities rest on a set of normative beliefs (basis for action), causal beliefs (interpretation and solution), criteria for the validity of knowledge, and proposals for public action based on shared practices (Haas, 1992). These elements are in themselves one of the reasons why it is so difficult to study regional epistemic communities, as they inevitably refer to the ability to determine a set of beliefs, knowledge, or mental maps. What's more, we need to question the homogeneity of these sets of beliefs, knowledge, and cognitive resources, insofar as although they derive from a regional organisation, they are fundamentally the result of collective production. This makes the task doubly arduous.

However, the definition proposed by Haas has the virtue of helping us to operationalise an analytical framework designed around three sub-questions:

1. To what extent can a regional organisation help to formulate a set of beliefs, and what kind of beliefs?
2. To what extent can a regional organisation contribute to the formulation of common knowledge?

3. To what extent are these beliefs and knowledge homogeneous? How can a regional organisation shape these cognitive dimensions?

On this basis, we formulate two propositions, the first being that ROs can be *builders of beliefs and knowledge*, the second being that they are also *vectors of homogenisation of beliefs and knowledge*.

About the first proposition, the study of the extent to which ROs disseminate and share a specific worldview, a vision of collective organisation and institutional functioning, and a vision of modes of belonging is at stake. Regarding the second proposition, we need to look at how a regional organisation manages to harmonise the way in which individuals (regional officials) interpret reality, and how, on the basis of their expertise, they manage to modify it (proposals, solutions, actions). How are solutions and proposals created? These elements refer to an understanding of practices, understood here as “ways of doing things that are endowed with social meaning” (Pouliot, 2016). Communities of practice, defined as “a bounded and social order wherein certain norms are internalised and practised in particular ways by officials” (Glas, 2018, p. 1122, based on Adler, 2008), have the capacity to nurture and consolidate epistemic communities. Following this conception, regional organisations can constitute social orders (Parthenay, 2019) in which agents acquire knowledge and know-how that in turn consolidate the epistemic community. Indeed, the sharing of practices has an impact on the community itself. As Glas points out, “collective understandings of what constitutes normal, natural and efficacious behaviour, and the practices that are made possible by this background knowledge, have impacts on patterns of relations within and beyond communities of practice” (Glas, 2018, pp. 1124–1125). There is a *feedback loop* between communities of practice and epistemic communities, with one producing effects on the other and so forth. Adler and Faubert go so far as to use the term *epistemic communities of practices* (Adler & Faubert, 2022), emphasising that practices are inseparable from the knowledge that gives them life and meaning.

However, the sociological dimension of the holders of knowledge and practices remains the most neglected aspect of the practice theory literature. Indeed, epistemic communities (and communities of practice) are formed through the agents who populate a space, a social milieu, or an organisation. In this respect, regional organisations are not only organisations, but also social milieus constituted by specific selection or recruitment logics. An individual’s entry into a regional organisation is not neutral, insofar as both sociological and institutional logics are at play. An individual enters an organisation with skills and knowledge that may or may not be in harmony with those of other employees. The logic of access to a regional organisation determines the characteristics of a regional professional milieu (*status group*, to use a Weberian notion) as well as subsequent professional circulations. Thus, questions of agent selection (who? why? and how?) in regional organisations condition the ability to form an epistemic community. To this extent, it appears that regional organisations are able, passively or actively, to form and shape epistemic communities.

In a regional organisation, there is not necessarily a predetermined relationship between the community of practice and the epistemic community. A community of

practice can be formed and give rise to an epistemic community, or vice versa. The intersubjective dynamic is based on the fact that knowledge and expertise evolve through experience and confrontation with reality. Akrich (2010) points out that communities of practice foster a series of phenomena: “collective learning,” “experiential knowledge,” and “appropriation of exogenous source of knowledge.” In this sense, the epistemic community can be transformed, consolidated or even driven by these collective experiences.

The Virtue of Developing the Studies of Regional Epistemic Communities

On the one hand, these epistemic communities are particularly active in areas of uncertainty. Indeed, noting the growing uncertainty and complexity of public action, Haas (1992) argues that decision-makers call on epistemic communities to elucidate cause-and-effect relationships, unravel the chain of events that caused a problem, define the interests of the players involved, and help formulate solutions by framing alternatives. Following this idea, regionalisms are uncertain institutional environments in many respects.

At the organisational level, first, as institutional ambiguity reigns as much as informal practices (Glas, 2018; Parthenay, 2019; Tieku, 2019), which place agents at a distance from identifiable and stable formal reference points. Knowing how to behave when a regulation exists but has not come into force or is simply not applied, knowing how to behave when a practice contradicts an organisational principle or interactional order—these are the skills required to deal with the institutional ambiguity defining the contours of a community of regional experts. It should be pointed out that the formation of such a community can take place autonomously within the organisation or be driven by external actors (donors from outside the region, the US, the EU, etc.).

The case of the *Central American Integration System* (SICA) is emblematic insofar as a regional epistemic community has been promoted exogenously by Spanish (AECID, via the Spain-SICA Fund) and European (via the PAIRCA program) cooperation. SICA is a state-led regionalist project born in 1991 and composed today of eight states (Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and the Dominican Republic). It had the initial aim of promoting peace and democracy, but quickly expanded its scope to include international economic integration and social development. It is now endowed with dense regional institutions (Parthenay, 2024). From the mid-2000s, these cooperants set up training programs, accompanying institutional support programs aimed at consolidating regional bureaucracy (Parthenay, 2019). In this phase, training programs and long-term internships were set up, bringing many junior professionals into the regional organisation. These individuals trained in the early 2010s now accumulate over a decade of professional experience within SICA, which positions them not only in positions of responsibility but also in positions of influence due to their expert knowledge of how the institutional

system works, its strengths and weaknesses, its internal governance, its sociability, as well as the functioning of interpersonal networks. In the regional organisational world, given the rapid turnover of regional agents, the constitution of an epistemic community confers a significant capacity for influence on the organisation's product and its general operation. This simple case illustrates how decision-making processes can be shaped by going beyond the letter of treaties, and in this case, by challenging formal hierarchies through practice. The formation of a community of experts in institutional functioning ultimately gives the ability to use institutions to orient their products according to specific preferences. Furthermore, this case provides an insight into the constitution of influential networks on a regional scale, going beyond national roots (or nationality, which can be an interpretative bias).

Similar dynamics may be observed in other ROs, but arising from endogenous processes. This is the process described by German Prieto about the *Andean Community of Nations* (CAN), another state-led regionalist project that took its current form in 1996 (Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia). He observes that a logic of identification has emerged within the RO, consisting of "ideas referring to the 'group feeling' shared by national and regional officials when working and negotiating together" (Prieto, 2015, p. 588). Presenting a case of FTA negotiations, Prieto stresses the fact that some regional officials mentioned that "technical capabilities of each country that, when brought together, allowed to strengthen the group's negotiating capability" (2015, p. 593) or that "the [CAN] has been a true trade negotiating school, as current member states' negotiators were formed within the [CAN] in negotiations with Mercosur, ALADI, and in the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas) bargaining process" (idem). Others said that "[CAN] members learned to negotiate at the [CAN] and learned to negotiate together" (idem). The idea that the Andean Community has become a *school* and that collective knowledge was generated through the sharing of technical capabilities or expertise reflects the idea that ROs can become vehicles for the formation of regional epistemic communities. In addition to this network of state representatives, technical support was provided by the CAN General Secretariat, in other words, the regional civil servants (who previously had careers in the national civil services of the member countries), who are experts in this field of activity. It is interesting to note that their careers tend to move back and forth between national civil service (ministries of economy, finance, or trade) and regional and/or international organisations (WTO, IADB, UNCTAD, etc.).

In terms of global governance, the position of regional organisations has evolved rapidly over the last decade. Some ROs have been granted new sectoral competences (notably in health and the environment), others have had to intervene in certain circumstances to compensate for the failings of states (for the African Union, see Glas, 2018; and Hardt, 2016), and some more have intervened in renewed models of interaction with states in exceptional circumstances, notably Covid-19 (Parthenay, 2021; Patterson & Balogun, 2021). Faced with floating patterns of interaction between member states and regional organisations, few regional agents know how to apprehend them and position themselves in decision-making chains. Expertise, organisational experience, and group solidarity (linked to the community) once again play a growing role in these uncertain and changing environments.

Conclusion

Understanding regional organisations as regional orders opens up new research perspectives on regionalism, and in particular on the formation of regional epistemic communities that are likely to emerge within them. This complements the approaches developed to date on the unilateral links that tie epistemic communities and regionalisms (from epistemic communities to regionalisms) and opens up the field of reflection on the plural influences exerted on the decision-making processes, on the evolution of power relations and on the consolidation of international regional authority. This epistemological approach of regional organisations lends centrality to relational approaches. In so doing, it places agents in a position of potential autonomy in relation to structural dynamics and confers on them a significant capacity to influence the content of decisions and policies implemented. The contemporary rise in the role of regional organisations and the assertion of their growing authority mean that these regional epistemic communities need to be placed at the heart of research agendas on regionalisms in order to better understand how they operate. Finally, these communities are also to be considered in terms of their links with broader and more diffuse configurations of actors, and in particular, the circulation of actors between epistemic communities positioned at different scales or themes.

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Essay 40: Approaches to Global Regionalism—The Contribution of World History, Global Political Economy, and Area Studies



Daniele Benzi and Rosmery Arrambide Daza

Introduction

Since the 1990s, two innovative research programs have advocated for broadening and deepening the study of regionalism, recognising it as a truly multidimensional, large-scale, and long-term historical phenomenon. These are the well-known New Regionalism Approach (NRA) by Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum, on the one hand, and the Regional Worlds (RW) project by Amitav Acharya, on the other, the latter now converged into the research program on Global IR and the *multiplex world order*.

Given their common inspiration from the constructivist turn in the social sciences, both NRA and RW have been interested in transcending the theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and disciplinary boundaries that hitherto remain in the field of regionalism studies. Hettne and Söderbaum have sought to go beyond “the deep intellectual and disciplinary rivalries that have constrained our understanding of what regions are, how they evolve and consolidate, how we should compare them, and what significance they hold in a world in flux” (Söderbaum, 2016, pp. 1–2). Acharya, in turn, has called to “address the challenge of constructing a global history of regionalism and developing approaches that capture its multiple and diverse forms” (2016, p. 121).

Their contributions have been fundamental in enriching and problematising the debate around the central concepts of the field (i.e. region, regionalisation and regional integration, in addition to regionalism itself) in fostering a dialogue among distinct theoretical traditions beyond those conventionally centred on the experience of the European Union (EU), in proposing new analytical concepts such as

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_40

regionness (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000), in revisiting a global intellectual history of regionalism prior to and beyond the EU (Acharya, 2012), and last but not least, in promoting comparisons between different regionalisms.

Acharya (2016), in particular, has defined, more clearly than any other scholar, the nature and pitfalls of what he dubbed *EUcentrism*. Paraphrasing a classic text from the postcolonial canon (Chakrabarty, 2000), one might argue that he has not only fruitfully *provincialised the European Union* but also rescued from oblivion the contributions by noteworthy non-Western pundits to the construction of distinctive (regional) world orders. While acknowledging the profound significance of the EU experience in regionalism studies, Acharya offers a pivotal “revisionist genealogy of comparative regionalism.” He also proposes a framework for regional comparative analysis that considers historical contexts, foundational objectives, domestic political structures, and patterns of security in relation to external powers (Acharya, 2012, 2014a, 2014b, pp. 94–96).

In summary, NRA and RW paved the way for a conception of Global Regionalism (GR) as a field of inquiry that integrates a historical and global dimension of regionalism while remaining attuned to regional particularities. Indeed, Hettne and Söderbaum have long advocated for a *global social theory* conceived as a “comprehensive social science that abandons state-centrism and methodological nationalism [...], yet one that goes beyond the mystifications of the concept of globalisation and global governance” (Söderbaum, 2016, p. 15). In the same vein, the perspective of the Regional Worlds began with an inquiry into Area Studies regarded “not just about the internal dynamics of regions, but also about how regions relate to each other and to the construction and management of global order” (Acharya, 2016, p. 122). Accordingly, Acharya maintains that a general theory of regionalism should encompass both the diversity of regionalism globally as well as the exchanges and shared learning that occur among them (*ibid.*).

However, despite (or thanks to) these achievements, in his synthesis of the New Regionalism Approach, Söderbaum still argued that “more than six decades of academic debate have failed to generate satisfactory answers to questions about the origins, logic, and consequences of regionalism” (2016, p. 1). He also observed that “fundamental disagreements” persist at the core of the field, particularly concerning crucial definitions and methods of analysis in the domain of comparative regionalism. Addressing the pervasive dominance of state-centrism and methodological nationalism, coupled with the top-down and often mechanical understanding of the relationships between global and regional orders, as well as the intricate interplay between material forces, institutions, and ideas, has proven particularly challenging. Consequently, Söderbaum’s call to “rethink regionalism” through deeper and more inventive historical, spatial, comparative, and global lenses is more relevant than ever.

The same author rightly argued that any “rethinking of regionalism is closely connected to the way we study, conceptualise and theorise regions and regionalism” (2016, p. 2). In this way, we consider Global Regionalism to be an eclectic and interdisciplinary body of knowledge emerging amidst a significant reconfiguration of major world regions and the global order as a whole. GR holds the potential to make

substantial contributions to our understanding of the ongoing global realignment and the reshaping of regions worldwide. However, it should be receptive to insights from a diverse array of disciplines and sub-disciplines, as well as to different theoretical traditions and methodologies, with the aim of complementing rather than supplanting conventional political science and economic approaches.

In the following discussion, we aim to highlight the contributions that World History (WH), Global Political Economy (GPE), and Area Studies, alongside related fields of inquiry, can offer to the emerging area of Global Regionalism. We argue that integrating historical and sociological perspectives with those from Critical Geography, Political Economy and Ecology, and Cultural Studies establishes a new productive framework for rethinking regionalism in historical, spatial, comparative, and global terms. As will be argued below, integrating a world-historical perspective with GPE and Area Studies offers valuable insights into both the potentials and limitations of universalist theoretical approaches to GR. In line with Cox's (1981) famous assertion that theory is always for someone and for some purpose, we argue that the origin of theories definitely matters. However, this does not preclude a rigorous theoretical and empirical investigation of the uneven processes of regional formation and dissolution globally. These processes have been shaped by the global expansion of capitalism over pre-existing social systems across past centuries, as well as by the transregional circulation of knowledge, beliefs, and ideologies spanning both the premodern and modern periods.

We focus, in particular, on critical perspectives and non-mainstream theories as we believe that critical approaches are better equipped to explore the origins, persistence, and transformations of power structures across time and space in which regions and regionalisms are constructed and deconstructed. A notable shortcoming of mainstream theorising is its limited engagement with history, particularly non-Western history (Iroulo & Lenz, 2022). Conversely, the constructivist turn has occasionally been criticised for its insufficient engagement with power (ibid.). In this regard, we argue that rethinking the *origins*, *logic*, and *consequences* of regionalism requires a deeper examination of the relationship between the structural historical formation of regions—particularly world regions—from a global and *longue durée* perspective, and the intentional projects of region-building, both formal and informal. A critical yet underexplored dimension in regionalism studies is the investigation of regions themselves—especially world regions—as historically constituted and socially embedded structures. While much scholarly attention has been devoted to formal and, to a lesser extent, informal regional institutions, we contend that equal emphasis should be placed on understanding regions as social structures. Such an approach is essential for enabling more robust analytical and conceptual comparisons across diverse forms of regionalism. In this regard, although a common theoretical framework may be suitable for some authors, we find it less useful if the goal is to make Global Regionalism a field of inquiry that is interdisciplinary and plural.

Our point of departure is a critical observation on the study of the EU made by a neo-Gramscian scholar.

Any theory of European integration will only be fully complete if it is placed in the context of an analysis of the relations of force in the context of global, regional, national, and local politics in the past, present, and future, in other words, the event, conjuncture, and *longue durée* that serve to constitute the political limits of the possible. (Gill, 2003, p. 64)

Gill further contends that “any theory of European integration is necessarily a theory of political and civil society, as well as a theory of international relations and political economy, and indeed, of European civilisation” (ibid., p. 65).

Building on Gill’s argument, we propose that an integrative approach—combining World History with related fields such as Global History (GH) and Macro-Historical Sociology (MHS), the Global Political Economy of capitalism, and Area Studies—can significantly enhance the understanding of Global Regionalism. This approach provides a critical counterpoint to dominant paradigms such as *EU-centrism*, state-centrism, and methodological nationalism. Furthermore, it fosters a deeper understanding of the historical and theoretical interconnections among regions, regionalisation, and regionalism(s). Finally, it offers valuable insights into the large-scale, long-term historical development of world regions and the macro-historical transformations occurring amidst escalating global disorder.

Let us briefly consider key aspects of this approach that contribute to rethinking regionalism in historical, spatial, comparative, and global terms.

World History, Global History, and Macro-Historical Sociology

Few scholars in the field of regionalism studies would dispute the significance of history. However, according to Fawcett (2015, p. 34), “work on regionalism rarely adopts a sustained historical perspective except in an introductory and incomplete way” (quoted in Söderbaum, 2016, p. 3). World History is primarily dedicated to the comparative study of major civilisations, while Global History has more recently emphasised the systematic investigation of the connections and interactions between different parts of the world since ancient times. Rather than focusing exclusively on states, both WH and GH adopt a broader perspective, examining diverse polities such as empires, city-states, and nomadic or stateless societies. These forms of organisation, which remained prevalent until the nineteenth century, continue to shape significant legacies today, influencing regions ranging from the heart of Eurasia to the Amazon. As a result, WH and GH implicitly—and at times explicitly—address the formation and dissolution of both micro and macro-regions, analysing their development and transformation through processes such as diplomacy and warfare, long-distance trade, merchant networks, migrations, and the related transregional exchange of beliefs, technologies, and ideas (Conrad, 2016; Vanhaute, 2013). This approach to GR offers a compelling critique of the state-centrism and frequent ahistoricism found in traditional regionalism studies, while also challenging the naïve

view of globalisation as a singularly novel phenomenon that underpins a new wave of regionalism.

Macro-historical sociology, in contrast to Historical Sociology, which typically continues to focus primarily on the state as its unit of analysis, investigates the origins of capitalism and modern society through a global lens. It examines and compares major empires, social systems, and world regions, aiming to identify both analogies and differences, particularly with respect to large-scale structures and long-term social patterns (Wallerstein et al., 2014). The synchronic analysis method commonly employed in GH and MHS not only facilitates the comparison of different regions within a given historical period but also enables a nuanced examination of their interrelationships within the broader context of global dynamics, including the evolution of capitalism. Significant contributions include the works of Bin Wong (1997) and Pomeranz (2000), which have spurred extensive debate on the reinterpretation of the *European miracle*. Similarly, a substantial body of comparative literature on empires, such as Darwin's work (2008), has expanded our understanding of the modern era beyond the formation and expansion of European nation-states and the associated international system. The renewed interest in imperial legacies and the revitalised geopolitical, economic, and identity-building dynamics they inspire are reshaping our conception of the modern age, challenging the idea that it is merely the development of the nation-state and the international system it created (Burbank & Cooper, 2021, 2023; Puri, 2021).

In a similar vein, the concept of the *world region* provides a robust foundation for examining regionalisms from both historical and global perspectives. Analysing historical world regions allows us to trace large-scale, long-term legacies across political, economic, institutional, and cultural domains that continue to shape the present. A key characteristic of the concept of a world region, as opposed to, for instance, a nation-state, is the assumption that its boundaries are porous, meaning they are neither precisely defined nor intended to be. The formation of an *Atlantic world* since the sixteenth century, in this regard, serves as a paradigmatic example of a world region gradually evolving into what we now refer to as the “West,” which may or may not include Latin America, for instance. The concept of a world region is more inclusive and flexible than that of civilisation or world economy, as it encompasses not only a diverse array of political and economic actors and institutions but also multiple cultures and civilisations within the same space, all situated within asymmetrical power relations, as demonstrated by the Atlantic world or East Asia. This perspective suggests that world regions should not be regarded as fixed or static entities, as is sometimes the case in Geography, Area Studies or even IR, but rather as dynamic social structures that evolve—or regress—over time.

A valuable theoretical approach to conceptualising world regions is through Cox's (1981) method of historical structures. Cox defines this method as focusing on “limited totalities,” which represent specific spheres of human activity within their historical contexts rather than the entire world (1981, p. 137). His framework encourages a critical examination of the interactions among social forces, state forms, and world

orders that shape particular regions and regional projects. This approach is particularly effective for analysing how material capabilities, ideas, and institutions influence regionalisms and regionalisation processes from a transnational perspective. It entails exploring specific regional configurations of power—both hegemonic and non-hegemonic—across different historical periods or through comparative perspectives, with a focus on their interactions with other regions and the global order. Although they do not explicitly reference Cox's method, but instead draw on the works of Fernand Braudel and Karl Deutsch, Arrighi et al. (2003) offer a compelling example of world region as a dynamic historical structure in their study of East Asia over the past five centuries.

As Söderbaum (2016) aptly observes, there is a pervasive tendency to focus primarily on state-led regionalism and regional organisations, often overlooking the broader processes of regionalisation. This emphasis is problematic, as it fails to account for the complex processes by which regions are both formed and deconstructed (p. 3). Our approach seeks to address this gap by emphasising the importance of understanding the historical structural contexts in which regions emerge. This perspective is crucial for fully grasping the diverse and often conflicting agencies and power dynamics involved in the formation and dissolution of regions and regionalisms.

Global Political Economy and Critical Geography

The aforementioned WH, GH, and MHS, however, are insufficient on their own for reconceptualising regionalism in spatial terms, particularly when transitioning from the macro-level dimensions of world regions to the more diverse and segmented forms of regionalisation. If “the research puzzle is to understand and explain the process by which regions come into existence and are consolidated” (Söderbaum, 2016, p. 6), then the Global Political Economy of capitalism and Critical Geography emerge as essential fields of inquiry for understanding the uneven development of regional spaces. In examining the construction of social spaces over the past two or three centuries, it is crucial to consider the interplay of political, economic, and sociocultural factors within the context of global capitalist development. Regionalism studies frequently overlook a critical analysis of capitalism as a central force shaping the global political economy. The framework of Global Political Economy offers a valuable perspective for understanding the social construction of regions through the processes of global capitalist accumulation across multiple scales.

For instance, David Harvey's theory (1982, 2003, 2019) of the uneven geographical development of capitalism provides valuable insights into the formation and transformation of regions from both spatial and multi-scalar perspectives. His framework underscores the importance of understanding regional spaces as integral to processes such as capital accumulation, molecular and expanded reproduction, spatial fixes, and accumulation by dispossession—critical elements of capitalist dynamics. Harvey's theory enables us to conceptualise, construct, and analyse regions

as historically and geographically contingent yet relatively fixed, while simultaneously recognising them as porous *space-times*. This approach dialectically integrates the absolute, relative, and relational dimensions of space, enabling a multidimensional and multi-scalar analysis of regional characteristics across both diachronic and synchronic perspectives.

Harvey's concept of *regionality* (2019) offers a significant complement to the notion of *regionness* introduced by Hettne and Söderbaum (2000). It addresses the implicit evolutionism and abstract nature of ideal types by providing a framework that enhances historical, economic, and socio-political consistency. As a mode of social construction of space, regionality is closely linked to mechanisms of capitalist accumulation, including its cyclical crises and temporary resolutions through spatial-temporal fixes. Moreover, it is deeply embedded in the power dynamics of various political entities, particularly transnational, national, and subnational actors. While recognising the significance of identity and cultural dimensions in the construction and dynamics of regionality, this concept enables a nuanced analysis of the uneven nature of economic development across various scales (micro-regional, meso-regional, macro-regional, and transregional) and dimensions (economic sectors, social and institutional relationships, and cultural patterns).

Area Studies

Area Studies lost significance during the *belle époque* of globalisation, an era marked by a focus on convergence and cultural homogenisation. However, this period has now ended, and certain foundational elements that gave rise to Area Studies remain highly relevant. In particular, their objective “to link the humanities to the social sciences across a broad range of interdisciplinary endeavour” (Katzenstein, 2002, p. 130) remains a vital and much-needed characteristic of the field.

Despite ongoing cross-civilizational and, at times, cross-regional hybridisation, the contemporary world is characterised not only by geopolitical turmoil, institutional reconfiguration, and intense economic competition—both within and between regions—not to mention pressing environmental and social challenges—but also by cultural anxiety and competing identity claims. These dynamics are closely tied to the resurgence of nationalism, accompanied by identity-driven discourses that are increasingly framed in civilisational terms, imbued with imperial—or explicitly imperialist—undertones, reflecting deep-seated anxieties about the future as well as a desire to reinvent the past. In this complex context, Area Studies, when disentangled from the Eurocentric and ideological biases historically embedded in the early American tradition, emerges as an indispensable framework for analysing the cultural and identity-specific dimensions of regions and regionalisms. Moreover, “the rise of national and regional centres of academic excellence and the re-articulation of Indigenous scholarly traditions” (ibid.)—a development heralded by Katzenstein twenty years ago—has now become an established reality.

To fully realise this potential, however, regions should not be conceived as static, monolithic singularities but as dynamic constructs. This necessitates moving beyond both geographic determinism and cultural essentialism. A critical reorientation entails foregrounding native perspectives, encompassing the intellectual contributions of regional elites as well as the lived experiences of popular classes, which collectively inform self-perception and worldview across historical periods. To this end, Area Studies should be integrated into a global and historical framework that amplifies the intellectual contributions of regions across diverse disciplines—including Philosophy, Politics, Law, and Economics—both within their local contexts and in relation to the global order. Such an approach fosters a nuanced understanding of the fluid interplay between regional identities and the broader global context.

Conclusion

Theorising within the emergent field of Global Regionalism is inherently contingent, shaped by the historical context in which it develops and the epistemic, theoretical, and methodological preferences of the researcher. The approach we advocate seeks to address some of the gaps in prior regionalism studies through a dual ambition: it is both circumscribed in its focus on historical and global contexts across the *longue durée* and expansive in its effort to transcend Eurocentric paradigms. This is achieved through an eclectic mindset that remains receptive to the complexities of a genuinely interdisciplinary perspective. Central to this endeavour is a focus on analysing the formation and dissolution of regions and regionalisms during periods of global disorder—what Gramsci described as an *interregnum*—such as the one characterising the present moment.

Comparative research on regionalism is both relevant and necessary for this task. However, as previously noted, we argue that such comparisons gain greater depth when approached from a historical perspective, analysing the relationships and contexts that shape not only the regional projects but also the regions themselves as social structures. By analysing the specific contexts of these regions, we can achieve a deeper understanding of the variations among formal and institutional entities. This perspective also highlights why efforts to replicate models frequently prove ineffective. Consequently, the comparative method should incorporate historical comparison. The framework of Global History and Macro-Historical Sociology, along with Critical Geography and Area Studies, provides a promising foundation for such analysis.

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Essay 41: Words of Power: Literature and Language in the Comparative Study of Regionalism



Narut Charoensri

Introduction

Regionalism has emerged as a significant phenomenon within the international relations system post-World War II. Scholarly debates concerning the emergence of regionalism are divided into two principal schools of thought. The first group emphasises internal factors within the region itself, arguing that the driving force behind states within the same region coming together to form cooperative frameworks arises from the specific conditions, factors, and interests intrinsic to that particular region. In contrast, the second group focuses on the international system, particularly highlighting the global economic and political structures that developed after World War II under the leadership of the United States. This group contends that regionalism was encouraged as a mechanism to promote a market-based economic system and to support the functioning of capitalism. These academic debates form the theoretical foundation for differing perspectives on regionalism (Börzel & Risse, 2016).

These divergent narratives or debates present an intriguing issue: regardless of whether the emergence of regionalism is attributed to internal factors or global structures, the analysis often centres on the state as the primary actor. The formation process of regionalism places significant emphasis on the modern nation-state as a key actor in determining its needs and in interacting with the international structure. This state-centric perspective stems from the experience of the European Union (EU), which began to take shape after 1945. The European Integration Theory has become a cornerstone in thinking about regionalism, influencing the theoretical development related to regional integration. These theories have subsequently influenced other regions' approaches to regionalism, particularly in terms of understanding the history of regionalism—focusing on the drivers, conditions, and factors that lead to its emergence—as well as the organisation of relations amongst different actors, whether

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states or regional institutions, and the institutionalisation of regionalism, including the setting of goals and mechanisms that facilitate regionalism (Rosamond, 2000; Warleigh-Lack & Van Langenhove, 2021).

Many scholars who study regionalism concur that, although the EU's experience has profoundly impacted the study of other regions, the unique characteristics of the EU should not be seen as a universal model to explain or understand regional phenomena in other parts of the world. Each region possesses its own distinctiveness, or *sui generis* nature, which requires a tailored analytical approach. The crucial question regarding the objectives of studying regionalism is not merely about why we engage in the comparative study of regionalism, but rather, it is about identifying the issues that arise, both in policy and academic terms, from viewing comparative regionalism through a Western-influenced lens. I propose that in order to understand regionalism, we should examine the role of language and literature as instruments that shape perceptions of identity and regional narratives across different regions. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the processes of definition, perception, and historical interpretation, which contribute to the construction of a shared regional identity.

Non-Western Approach Revisited

Before delving into the study of how Western approaches to regionalism have been developed, it is essential first to establish a shared understanding of what is meant by the term *the West*. In this essay, I define *the West* as encompassing both a physical region and a cultural-civilisational world. The West refers to a group of countries situated in *Europe*, recognised as a continent, and it is characterised by a civilisation that is interconnected through a shared Indo-European language, religion, and cultural heritage. The concept of the West has played a significant role in shaping the development of the world across various dimensions. When one examines the long arc of world history, it becomes evident that the West has been instrumental in determining the forms and directions of global development in numerous ways.

Although the study of regionalism has long captured the interest of International Relations (IR) scholars as a significant phenomenon post-World War II, the methodology has been dominated by approaches that lack sufficient pluralism (Acharya, 2014). In reality, this phenomenon occurs globally within different contexts, rendering the quest for a perfect and pre-packaged explanatory framework somewhat irrational. The theories developed to understand the phenomenon and processes of regionalism originated from the context in which European countries began seeking cooperation in the aftermath of World War II. In contrast, regionalism in Southeast Asia emerged several decades after the EU, with the state formation process in Southeast Asia taking additional decades post-World War II to result in modern sovereign states. Prior to World War II, attempts at regional grouping were unprecedented. The vast differences in nearly every dimension—ethnic groups, religions, cultures, languages, political systems, and belief systems—significantly

hindered the conceptualisation of regional cooperation in what is now referred to as Southeast Asia (Acharya, 2014). A pivotal moment for Southeast Asian regionalism was the initiation of economic cooperation driven by the United States, leading to the establishment of ASEAN (Stubbs, 2005). Whilst there have been diplomatic, economic, political, and security explanations for ASEAN as a product of Southeast Asian states' efforts, such attempts would not have succeeded without the involvement of a great power to allocate regional authority where no established economic, political, or security order existed.

Historically, the distribution of ancient cities in mainland Southeast Asia revealed numerous scattered political entities. Studies of these ancient Southeast Asian cities often focus on the extent of their power and the rivalries among them (Heidhues, 2000). These narratives rarely highlight attempts at compromise on interests, goals, and instruments for regional integration. Therefore, understanding the existence of a *region* necessitates defining the components that contribute to its identity and exploring how the sense of being *part of* a region arises, how this feeling develops, and how the region's identity is perceived and accepted in the international community (Breslin & Croft, 2012). The development of regionness from the past to the present is an important subject for further study, particularly in examining how regionness emerges, how it evolves over time, and the processes of negotiation and contestation among various actors involved. For instance, studies on Southeast Asia often focus on regionalisation that took place after the Second World War, when modern sovereign states had already been established (Kunnamas, 2015). However, research on regionalisation processes that occurred prior to this period remains largely unexplored.

The study of regionalism in different parts of the world may require distinct approaches in terms of methodology, key issues, or analytical frameworks to ensure a more comprehensive and contextually relevant understanding. These theories, based on the rational actor model, suggest that the behaviour of modern sovereign states aligned with national interests may not sufficiently account for the diverse political experiences and structures in different regions. Political experience and the nature of political institutions play a crucial role in shaping state identities, interests, and the process of negotiation and compromise on mutual benefits and the tools to achieve them.

The study of regionalism that employs state-centric theories, particularly those rooted in European traditions that emerged in the early stages, fails to capture the *sui generis* characteristics with historical contexts unique to other regions. This limitation is especially evident when other regions have distinct contexts, such as the formation of political units from pre-historical times and the interactions between these political entities within specific areas, leading to a history of interactions between diverse political units and individual actors that differ from the European context. The application of a European framework in these cases presents policy challenges, as policymakers tend to focus on the operations of institutions as centralised political entities with decision-making power, overlooking the historical and social contexts surrounding interactions between various actors (Acharya, 2014). Whilst emphasising the interests and functioning of institutions is not inherently flawed, the comparative study of

regionalism could benefit more from considering the underlying ideas that influence the foreign policy thinking of modern states. Additionally, the academic problem of adopting a Western-centric perspective is that scholars who developed their academic careers during the Cold War were influenced by their education abroad and exposure to literature authored by Western scholars, leading to the transmission of Western knowledge to their home countries. This influence often resulted in a temporary stagnation in the development of theories within specific regional contexts until the emergence of a movement seeking alternative, non-Western-centric approaches to the study of regionalism, led by scholars such as Amitav Acharya.

What and How to Compare?

Comparing regionalism is, nonetheless, a vague endeavour as the point of understanding the similarities and differences between the *regions* and *regionalisms* is still questionable. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the fact that the nature of each region and regionalism is *sui generis*. The study of regionalism must, therefore, begin by revisiting the fundamental questions of what exactly we are studying and how we should approach this study to develop distinct explanations that adequately address the diverse forms of regionalism present in the world.

What?

To understand the objectives of comparing regionalism, it is essential to revisit the goals framed within a Western-centric perspective. What, indeed, were these objectives? The study of regionalism, which emphasises state-centric approaches, institutions, and the mechanisms driving these processes, remains important and useful for managing international cooperation and organisations (Hurrell, 1995). However, in the modern world, where value systems, cultures, and the intensity of interactions between various actors have been amplified by technological advancements, understanding these phenomena can no longer be confined to viewing the state as the sole actor in the process of regionalisation. Instead, there is a need to consider regionalism as a product of common awareness that emerges from literature and language.

This perspective on common awareness may seem akin to the social constructivist school of thought, which focuses on identity, ideas, and norms within society (Checkel, 2020). However, viewing this without a historical context is overly non-historical, as it does not take into account the historical processes that shape the foundational perceptions, definitions, and the subsequent impact on worldviews that states construct in their relations with one another (Risse, 2016). In other words, the foreign policies of states are not merely the result of decisions made by rational policymakers in conference rooms within foreign ministries in capital cities. On the contrary, the formulation of foreign policy is deeply rooted in the fundamental ideas,

perceptions, and worldviews of individuals, which are shaped by the state, society, and the geopolitical context of the time.

Consequently, the perception, definition, and conceptualisation of the *region*, the identification of regionness, the determination of who belongs to the same region, and the delineation of the boundaries of regional awareness are all influenced by the literary and linguistic world of individuals. Although these individual worlds differ based on the contexts in which people grow up, shared explanations or dominant worldviews are commonly observed and significantly impact current perceptions, feelings, and conceptualisations of cooperation and the world (Katzenstein, 2005).

How?

I propose that, in order to move beyond the Western-centric, modern nation-state-focused approach to comparative regionalism, alternative perspectives could be employed as tools for study. For instance, we might consider exploring regionalism from different cases, such as literature and language.

Through Literatures

Literature is an area that scholars of IR may not have widely explored, despite its significant potential to reflect the interactions between various actors in the system of relations amongst different agencies, long before the emergence of the modern sovereign nation-state. There have been some studies on this subject, such as Sheeran (2007), who explored how integrating literary analysis into the study of international relations can enhance our understanding of global politics. However, studies that utilise literature often focus on the examination of history or emotions, rather than exploring regionalism across different areas of the world. Literature serves as a mirror of the connections between villages, kingdoms, and territories across different regions, capturing interactions between agencies such as travel, trade, and warfare, and recording them in written form. Here, the term *literature* is not used in its narrow sense, referring only to human creations intended for reading pleasure. Instead, it encompasses essays, poetry, prose, and written historical evidence that documents various past events.

Understanding through literature contributes to our comprehension of interactions between agencies, which is crucial for recognising regional awareness, or *regionness*. Literature reflects when and on what issues various actors began to interact, such as trade, the journeys of monks, or the explorations of new territories. It also illustrates how spaces were interpreted, indicating the political entities' jurisdictions. The reflections within these writings help us grasp the interactions between agencies, the interpretation of power boundaries, the perception of *otherness* of political entities, and the understanding of regionness. Moreover, these literary narratives

are often utilised as political tools in the contemporary world to serve international political objectives. For example, India frequently uses the Ramayana as a foundation for establishing relations with Southeast Asia, citing long-distance trade that dates back to the eighteenth century and has since become a significant civilisational foundation for Southeast Asia (Amaresh, 2020). This literary reference serves as a starting point for India to initiate dialogues or strengthen ties with Southeast Asia. Similarly, in the case of China, the shared historical experiences of the Silk Road, along with related writings and historical evidence, are employed to craft narratives with various countries, laying the groundwork for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework (Qian, 2022). One possible approach to utilising literature in this context involves examining how different historical periods reference other political entities. This analysis can provide insights into perceptions of enmity, the number of political entities recognised at a given time, the distribution of power among various entities, and the nature of their interactions. Such an approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the quantity, authority, and power dynamics between these entities. Furthermore, comparing the literature produced by different political entities within a specific region during the same period enables scholars to trace the evolution or formation of regional identities through patterns of alliance and hostility. Additionally, this method allows for an examination of the terminology used to refer to other actors within the region, further illuminating the broader political and social landscape of the time.

Therefore, the study of literature plays a crucial role in understanding regionalism in two dimensions. The first dimension views literature as a reflection of past phenomena that were recorded, often unintentionally, highlighting the interactions between actors and helping us understand the interpretations presented in the literature and by its authors concerning the events that occurred. The second dimension considers literature as a record and a political tool in the present, contributing to the creation of a sense of unity or crafting narratives that weave together shared experiences to facilitate regional integration.

Through Language

It is commonly observed that the study of language is often separated from the study of IR. Language has frequently been relegated to the role of a tool for analysing political communication or as a political product used to construct discourses by those in power, either for governance or to mobilise public sentiment. However, language is, in fact, a crucial tool for understanding regionalism. Language contributes to the creation of shared regional consciousness. In literature or historical documents, certain terms were used to describe political entities before the emergence of the modern nation-state. The use of such terms reflects a perception of political entities that differs from the modern nation-state concept rooted in the Westphalian system (Holsti, 2004). These *terms* shape the *history* and *perception* of the past, evolving into the dominant historical narratives of states and influencing their relations with

others. For instance, the perception of regional identity, such as *We are Southeast Asia*, necessitates an understanding of what constitutes Southeast Asia. This requires an initial process of definition—what exactly is Southeast Asia? Notably, the term *Southeast Asia* itself is a product of political discourse. In this sense, understanding the construction of regional perception through language and terminology becomes a crucial process. The terms employed hold significant implications for understanding self-perception and the perception of others. Moreover, the introduction of terms to describe various regions has been influenced by external powers rather than by the regions themselves (Wæver, 1998). The naming of regions was often determined by external great powers, not by the people within those regions (Agnew, 2003). Consequently, the regional identity, including the naming of a region, was shaped by external factors rather than internal dynamics (Acharya, 2014).

The study of the terminology used by states in the past to understand themselves, as well as the use of terms as instruments for geopolitical and military strategy, offers insights into how we can understand or compare regionalism (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Investigating terminology helps us recognise the historical evolution of self-perception in modern nation-states. In each state, narratives have been constructed through the use of specific terms to understand themselves or to interact with political entities in the past (Anderson, 2006). This self-perception has influenced the formation of relations between political institutions over time, the cultivation of state pride, and the determination of relations with other political entities—what might be described in the language of modern IR as contributing to the formulation of foreign policy (Rosamond, 2000; Stubbs, 2005).

The Benefits of Using Literature and Language as Tools for Comparing Regionalism

Literature and language should be regarded as tools and methodologies for comparing regionalism. As mentioned earlier, the study of comparative regionalism has been heavily influenced by the experiences of the EU. Whilst starting with an understanding of the EU's experience is not inherently flawed, building upon this foundation to comprehend the specific contexts of each region can benefit scholars in two primary ways: (1) in terms of policy and (2) academically.

From a policy perspective, a comparative approach to regionalism that relies on European experiences and emphasises state sovereignty may be insufficient for understanding phenomena such as nationalism, the context of regional awareness, and perceptions of *otherness*—that is, determining who is considered part of the *region* constructed by states within a particular area. A clear example can be seen in Europe, where the shared social and cultural contexts amongst European states, including a common linguistic foundation, facilitate regional integration. However, when this framework is applied to other regions, such as South Asia, Africa, or Southeast Asia, where social and historical-political contexts differ significantly, the

notion of a region as a *collective rational actor* becomes less tenable in the modern global context. Each state within these regions continues to pursue distinct national interests, and the rapidly changing geopolitical and economic landscape makes the application of rigid, uniform concepts increasingly inappropriate. The policy issue arises when policymakers adhere to a Eurocentric approach to managing international cooperation and institutions, which can diminish the plurality of societies and reduce regional integration policies to a narrow focus on institutional management. This approach neglects the social and historical dynamics of the past that continue to influence the present, as well as the social context planning that will impact future regional cooperation.

From a theoretical perspective, Western centrism remains the dominant trend in the study of regionalism. Although there is a growing movement towards adopting alternative, non-European perspectives on comparative regionalism, it is unlikely that academia will be able to fully transcend this Eurocentric foundation. The origins of regionalism studies are rooted in Europe, and English remains the lingua franca for understanding the world. This experience is evident in the efforts of IR scholars who have attempted to deconstruct Western theories and propose more diverse alternatives. However, these efforts are still in a transitional phase and may not achieve widespread adoption in the near future. Thus, a comparative study of regionalism that moves beyond Western centrism is unlikely to break theoretical boundaries if the Western experience continues to serve as the central axis. The alternative approach to studying regionalism must shift towards transcending state-centric perspectives to examine interactions amongst actors, political units, phenomena, or entities beyond the state. This would allow for the observation of interactions amongst actors and phenomena, incorporating historical and political contexts to gain a deeper understanding of other surrounding contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of regionalism must evolve beyond the Eurocentric, state-centric frameworks that have historically dominated the field. Whilst the EU's experience has significantly shaped the theoretical underpinnings of regionalism, applying these frameworks universally overlooks the unique socio-historical and political contexts of other regions. The inherent diversity in regional experiences, particularly in areas like South Asia, Africa, and Southeast Asia, challenges the notion of a region as a *collective rational actor* and highlights the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach to regionalism. From a policy perspective, this Eurocentric focus risks simplifying the complexities of regional cooperation, potentially undermining the efficacy of integration efforts in non-European contexts. Academically, whilst there is a growing movement towards incorporating non-Western perspectives, the entrenched influence of Western theories and the dominance of English in global academia suggest that these alternative approaches will continue to face challenges.

To address these issues, future research on regionalism must embrace a more pluralistic approach, considering the interactions between various actors, political units, and phenomena within their specific historical and political contexts. This shift will not only enrich the understanding of regionalism but also enhance its relevance and applicability across different global regions.

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Essay 42: What is in a Name? From the Geo-Economics of the *Asia-Pacific* to the Geo-Politics of the *Indo-Pacific*



Richard Higgott

Introduction

From the series of interesting questions posed by the editors for this volume to celebrate UNU-CRIS, I have chosen to address how we conceptualise discourses of regionalism as they evolve over time, how they grow in and out of fashion and the implications that this has for the practice of regionalism by the principal regional actors. I do this via embedding a case study of the change from a “discourse of the *Asia-Pacific*” to a “discourse of the *Indo-Pacific*” in the wider international context, specifically observing the changing fortunes of economic globalisation and geopolitics as hegemonic narratives of global and regional order. I show how we are witnessing a declining interest in the geo-economics of the *Asia-Pacific* as the regional hosting metaphor and the rising focus on the geopolitics of the *Indo-Pacific* as the regional hosting neologism that reflects the current wider hegemonic narrative and the subsequent intensification of the great power competition between the USA and China.

This short essay is an adaptation of a public lecture delivered at the University of Lisbon, Symposium *Europa e Asia: Construção e Interações Num Mundo Dividido*, April 16, 2024. It draws on a much longer (9000-word) Report that can be found online at LSE/IDEAS (<https://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS>). The longer paper carries extensive documentation and citations to support the arguments advanced in this short essay.

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University
Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_42

Ideas Have Consequences: It Is Autumn for Globalisation and Springtime for Geopolitics

The relationship between theory and practice is more important than many in the policy world often assume. It is more complicated and less understood than we appreciate. We all too often ignore the degree to which ideas cast massive policy shadows. As Keynes noted:

The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. (Keynes, 1935, p. 383)

Geopolitics, as both idea and practice, was overshadowed empirically and intellectually by globalisation for nearly three decades after the end of the Cold War. But geopolitics is back. It is currently the most powerful ideational metaphor in the lexicon of international politics. Perhaps nothing symbolises this in the contemporary imagination of the policy maker than the rising profile of the annual Munich and Shangri-La (security) Dialogues and the decline in the fortunes of the Davos World Economic Forum.

Of course, globalisation is not dead. But it is challenged now more than ever since the end of the Cold War (especially since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008). The hegemonic neo-liberal (Hayekian) paradigm is increasingly questioned and exhibits paradoxes too significant to ignore. The unalloyed benefits of globalisation have been over-hyped, and the negative externalities underplayed. For sure, globalisation has been a major generator of gross aggregate welfare (lifting nearly 1 billion out of poverty). But it has also been a major generator of inequality. Its negative distributional consequences have fueled socio-political resentment against soi-distant cosmopolitan elites. It has been central to the rise of anti-globalism, populist and nativist politics and anti-immigration (see Higgott, 2022; Muller, 2017; Oswald, 2022).

Accompanying these changes, we have also seen the emergence of a new mercantilism reflected in the rise of protectionism and the decline of support for an open global economy and multilateral institutions (see Helleiner, 2023). These trends were captured in the words of Joe Biden's NSC Chief, Jake Sullivan's (2023) "New Washington Consensus" (advancing industrial Policy, the IRA and Chips Acts and strategies of delinking, reshoring and onshoring). It also found voice in the *Economist's* identification of the trend towards "homeland economics" (*The Economist*, 2023).

If it is autumn for globalisation, it is clearly springtime for geopolitics. But, like globalisation, geopolitics has its pluses and minuses. It enhances and heightens our risk awareness, and we do need good geopolitical risk analysis in an age when the USA and China are becoming increasingly competitive. It is not wrong for states to be concerned about China's aggressive, forward-leaning practices in international relations. China needs to be watched. The question is how we watch it and what policy prescriptions to adopt. There is a fine line between deterrence and provocation.

Language matters, and the excessive zeal of advocates of either discourse—be they neo-Hayekians or hard realist security specialists—can be incubators of extreme

prescriptive policy positions. The logic of realist geopolitics can be self-fulfilling. It invariably privileges a disposition for war. This leaves us with a difficult question to answer: *Will modern geopolitical analysis, with its search for threats and enemies, simply exacerbate rather than mitigate political strategic competition and conflict between the US and China?*

Of course, the discourse of geopolitics is very different from that of globalisation. A concept arguably measured in millennia rather than centuries, the recent origins of geopolitics can be traced to analysts/practitioners such as Mackinder, Spykeman, and Mahan in the early twentieth century, Kissinger and Brzezinski in the second half of the twentieth century, and Brands and his US enthusiastic security colleagues in the current period in the twenty-first century (Brands, 2023).

There are both liberal and authoritarian strands of geopolitical thought to be found in the early decades of the twenty-first century. But central to both is the need to ensure a *balance of power*, which may be seen as the strategist's equivalent of the economist's search for the "equilibrium". The discourse of geopolitics in the post-Cold War era is a metaphor to address great power competition (GPC). GPC is largely bilateral, transactional, and indeed geographical. There is little room for multilateral collective action problem-solving here. At the empirical level, talk of economic interdependence and integration has declined as talk of conflict in the security domain has grown stronger. Great power rivalry, notably between the US and China, has surged after the brief post-Cold War unipolar moment.

Further, the discourse of geopolitics is replete with the language of *threat inflation*. Whatever China (seen in bipartisan Washington DC jargon as the *pacing threat*) does is read by the USA in zero-sum terms and as a precursor to future aggression. However, two significant differences exist from the days of the US-Soviet Union Cold War. First, the US and China are economically interdependent in a way that the US and the Soviet Union never were. Second, despite Biden's identification of a "democracy-authoritarian divide," neither of the great powers is a leader of an ideologically coherent bloc. The world may be bifurcated, but it is neither bipolar nor multipolar. It is, for want of a better expression, *fuzzy*. Many states have become hedgers rather than bandwagons (see Higgott & Reich, 2022).

Geopolitics should learn lessons from the hegemony of neoliberal globalisation here. In the early days of neo-Hayekian ideational hegemony, we saw only the benefits of economic globalisation and none of its problems. We must not repeat the mistake in our newfound love affair with geopolitics. We need to take its negative externalities into account too. Especially the self-fulfilling properties of much of the language of geopolitics: that is, heightened great power rivalry, growing regional security dilemmas and escalated threat inflation. We must ask if geopolitics is fulfilling a similar all-embracing, non-critical role to that played by economic globalisation in the late 20th/early twenty-first century.

Words Have Consequences: From *Asia-Pacific* to *Indo-Pacific*

As Amitav Acharya (2024) has noted, the Asia-Pacific was a term coined by economists. Indeed, the language of (neo) liberal economics drove the idea of the Asia-Pacific as a region. It reflected the privileging of trade liberalism and open regionalism. While it cannot be discussed here, the intellectual history of the evolution of APEC is a fascinating story of modern-day regional diplomacy (see Higgott, 2017; Higgott et al., 1993; Mack & Ravenhill, 1994). Equally, the Indo-Pacific, says Acharya, was coined by strategists. The language of geopolitics is driving the Indo-Pacific idea. It has become the discourse of the official and unofficial security policy communities of the USA and its allies. While other regional actors—Indonesia and ASEAN primarily—also use the idea and language of the Indo-Pacific, their understanding is different to that of the USA and its major allies. It is driven by a more open, less geopolitical, more cooperative understanding of the region and with much less of an anti-China focus; this position is articulated in the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (ASEAN, 2019).

For the USA, economics, more than security, drove Obama's Pivot to Asia and the development of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). However, Donald Trump withdrew the US from the TPP on his first day in office. Joe Biden did not attempt to reverse this. The US formalised the idea of the Indo-Pacific with the concept of a *Free and Open Indo-Pacific in 2019* (US Department of State, 2019). It was seen as a means to consolidate the security agenda of the QUAD (India, Australia, Japan). Biden's policy reflected substantial continuity with Trump's. His priorities in the region, like Trump's—and in contrast to the heady days of globalisation under Clinton, Bush and Obama—operate with the trigger words, geopolitics and security: a grand alliance against the competitive growth of Chinese power aimed at containing its global influence. In simple terms, when it comes to the Indo-Pacific and China, Biden and his advisers can be called *primacists*—albeit that this is a strategy that misreads the changing nature of power considerations both regionally and in the contemporary world order.

Indo-Pacific is not a neutral description of the region: it is one designed to counter a China-dominated regional order. Concern with China, at the heart of the US grand strategy, dominates the views of both its official and quasi-official analytical policy community within the DC Beltway (Jentlesen, 2020). The geopolitical imagining of the Indo-Pacific discourse has China as the threat at its centre. Indeed, the Indo-Pacific, according to the 2022 US *National Security Strategy*, is the “epicentre of 21st-century geopolitics” (The White House, 2022, p. 37). Only a small part of the Washington analytical community thinks that China is not an existential threat (see, for example, Murphy, 2024; Taylor et al., 2019; Weiss, 2022).

At the policy level, the dominant discourse, especially in think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute, the Cato Institute, CSIS, and the Atlantic Council, is now rivalry-driven, virulently geopolitical and anti-China. Even the CFR and Brookings carry fewer discussions of the prospects for cooperation and conflict

mitigation than conflict. At the extreme, in 2019, the most hawkish of Cold War organisations, the Committee for Present Danger, underwent a resurrection. China was substituted for the Soviet Union in its full title.¹

But, at a time when the Trans-Atlantic world is learning what *The Economist* (2023) calls “homeland economics” and asking how Indo-Pacific geostrategic tensions affect it and what it can do to contain them, many Asian countries are developing an important and varied portfolio of institutional, regional economic cooperation. Note that TPP did not collapse with the US withdrawal. It became CPTPP and is clearly a viable organisation, if less significant than it would have been with US membership. Similarly, RCEP is fulfilling an increasingly relevant regional role as it gears up since its 2023 ratification. The AIIB, legitimate criticism of its *modus operandi* notwithstanding, has become, against US wishes, a key component of regional economic statecraft.

The US, in contrast to the turn of the century, is not in a good regional economic position 25 years on. It is not involved with any of the above major economic initiatives. APEC, the quintessential site of economic and institutional activity in the Asia–Pacific, which includes the US, is running out of steam. The economic pillar of the Biden Indo-Pacific strategy—the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, introduced in May 2022—has had little positive impact on the regional economic discourse to date.

The USA is, of course, not alone in its changing understanding of the region. For example, the language change from the Asia–Pacific to the Indo-Pacific also reflects a dramatic shift in the strategic culture of its strongest regional partner, Australia. Since 2018, it has transitioned from being a cooperative regional middle power building towards an open economic Asia–Pacific with strong economic links with China to a client status and to the strongest US regional ally in the anti-China camp. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, Australia was at the forefront of the movement for open economic regionalism in the Asia–Pacific. The Bob Hawke (1983–1991) and Paul Keating (1991–1996) governments worked hard to address Australia’s regional liminality. In the discourse of the day, they wanted Australia to be both *in* and *of* the Asia–Pacific, not merely a European outpost. It was a period of sure-footed regional economic diplomacy. Indeed, in 1989, Hawke kicked off APEC as a focal point for regional economic dialogue (for a discussion, see Cooper et al., 1993; Higgott & Nossal, 1997).

Australian foreign policy lost its sure-footedness in the second decade of the twenty-first century as then Prime Minister Scott Morrison called for a China Covid Inquiry (essentially at US bidding), generating a massive deterioration in the relationship with China. It also exhibited apparent duplicity in cancelling the Franco-Australian submarine contract in favour of the AUKUS agreement. This act reflects in many ways the culmination of the changing nature of the Australian approach to regionalism as AUKUS became the latest stage in the US regional primacy project (Prashad, 2022).

¹ See, <https://presentdangerchina.org>.

Following Japan's initial use of the term, the Indo-Pacific regional narrative emerged in Australia in the 2013 Australian *Defence White Paper*. It took root as a neologism over the decade since then. Australia moved firmly towards the US *geopolitical* view of the Indo-Pacific under the government of Bill Morrison between 2018 and 2022. Australia signed on as a faithful US ally in a manner greater than at any time since its involvement in the Vietnam War.

As the paper has been at pains to suggest, ideas and policy discourse have consequences for the formation of regional narratives. The security discourse in the Australian policy community, as no doubt in South Korea and Japan, is replete with geopolitical jargon and phrases of direct US origin. The US Defence Intelligence Agency even has its own people working in-house in the Australian Defence Intelligence Organisation in Canberra. The predominance of the *voice of Indo-Pacific* has given rise to a *discursive disequilibrium* in the debate over Australia's strategic culture that, as in Washington, now sees *China as the existential threat*. A former head of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade talks of the "hijacking" of the Australian "economics establishment" by the "security establishment." The security paradigm, unsurprisingly, permeates Canberra institutions such as ASIO, ASIS, some key think tanks, especially the hawkish anti-China Australian Security Policy Institute (essentially a quasi-autonomous arm of government) and of course, the highly influential Murdoch press, notably the *Australian* (for a discussion see, Curran, 2023; Scrafton, 2021, 2023; Smith, 2023).

But this geo-political security view of the Indo-Pacific region, with AUKUS at its core, is not without its critics who opine for the days of the economic conception of the Indo-Pacific. Australia's leading security specialist, Hugh White (2024), describes AUKUS as the "most disastrous defence policy mistake in Australian history." He notes an excessively elongated implementation time frame, dubious political viability and commitment of the US and the UK over time, a gap in US expectations and Australian commitments and the vaulting ambitions of AUKUS being out of step with Australia's middle power traditions, international status and regional economic aspirations. White challenges the largely untested assumption in the broader Australian security establishment's countervailing Indo-Pacific narrative that AUKUS axiomatically makes Australia safer (White, 2024).

Conclusion

This essay has painted on a broad canvas, noting that ideas and words have consequences in the formation of a regional discourse. Understandings of *region* are not unalterable. Nor are they just rhetorical or heuristic academic devices, as the paper has demonstrated with its juxtaposition of the ideational and policy fortunes of globalisation with that of geopolitics as organisational/normative narratives of world order. The growing influence of the discourse of geopolitics has been creating new mental maps or regions.

In empirical terms, the new mental maps privilege an Indo-Pacific over an Asia-Pacific understanding of region. The prescriptive security-driven nature of much geopolitical analysis makes the prospects of threat inflation more likely. This, in turn, appears to be intensifying great power rivalries and exacerbating regional security dilemmas. This change downplays the earlier globalisation discourse of cooperative open economic regionalism that prevailed largely until the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. This latest discourse of the Indo-Pacific has minimised positive assumptions of shared preconditions—proximity, interest, and identity—that are widely understood to drive region formation (see Kolmas et al., 2024). It has done so at the expense of a discourse privileging geopolitical strategic competition.

Notwithstanding some relatively impressive results in the economic domain, notably the transformation of TPP into RCTPP and the gradual consolidation of RCEP, we are nevertheless seeing a regional dialogue driven by the imperatives of geostrategic competition that assumes (i) the US will contain China's continued economic and political rise and (ii) that the US approach to the Indo-Pacific will remain consistent. Both assumptions are, at best, problematic. There are perhaps two reasons. Firstly, it is unnecessary for Kishore Mahbubani (2020, 2021, 2023) to assume China's rise will continue. Secondly, US foreign policy, and by extension, support for allies such as Australia, is at the whim of the US presidential system and all its attendant consequences. The impact of the second Trump Administration can only be guessed at at this stage. As with globalisation, geopolitics has, at its core, serious contradictions. Asserting the geopolitical over the geo-economic casts prominent global and regional policy shadows.

Afterword (April 8) 2025

This essay was originally drafted in the second half of 2024 and well prior to the beginning of the second Trump presidency. Three months into Trump's second term, nothing has occurred to undermine the theme of this essay. If anything, it reinforces the essay's central argument—that the privileging of economic globalisation is under sustained and increasing challenge, and is indeed weakening in the face of Trump's essentially mercantilist international economic policy. And that the politico-security dynamic of geo-politics is further strengthening. President Trump has had a greater effect on contemporary international relations than anyone imagined at the time of his inauguration. The essence of his foreign policy—notably claims on the Panama Canal, Greenland, Canada and even Gaza, a virulently pro-Putin stance in the Ukraine-Russia war accompanied by a thinly veiled contempt for his European partners in NATO and a policy of “back to the future” tarrification bent on creating a new era of protectionism in global trade—needs no detailed rehearsal here.

What is worth noting for this essay, however, and indeed this volume, is his implicit understanding of regionalism. He has yet to articulate a formal position on regions. Not for Trump a detailed interest in regional economic integration, structured regional security or good cultural and public relations with regional partners (as his disinterest

in NATO, his dismantling of the instruments of US soft power diplomacy, and his yet unarticulated view of the Indo-Pacific region attests). Rather, in an explicit turn to the past, his (misconceived) understanding of transnational international activity is best seen in the systems of regional control offered by a return to a world of spheres of influence where the regional hegemonic powers (and strongman leaders of these spheres) have control over the junior and smaller actors in their given sphere. The coincidence of his interests in Panama, Canada and Greenland is in fact no coincidence at all. It is a reflection of Trump's interest in a contiguous regional sphere of influence and control.

As the world searches for a new form of order in the wake of the passing of the US-led (always selectively liberal and selective global) order, it is too early to tell whether the Trumpian view will prevail. It is difficult at this juncture to know whether the primarily negative effects of spheres of influence (autocratic/anti-democratic control of the sphere by its hegemon) will outweigh the prospect of states organising their regions, and indeed the wider order, in a way that is progressively opening and integrative and that accepts the best normative elements of the former liberal order at the same time as it provides space for the burgeoning number of states previously excluded from a more democratic say in the management of that order. Time alone will tell.

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Essay 43: Is the Study of Comparative Regionalism Fit for Purpose? Rethinking Regionalism's Relevance in Times of Crisis



Philomena Murray and Margherita Matera

Introduction

Scholars have spent considerable attention defining regionalism and how best to compare regional bodies. In this essay, we ask whether the study of comparative regionalism is still fit for purpose. We briefly investigate the purpose of comparative regionalism and whether there is room for improvement, with a focus on crisis.

We ask how relevant and feasible comparative research on regionalism during periods of crisis is. In so doing, we revisit the question: What is the purpose of comparative regionalism? How might we broaden its scope? We propose that the objective of comparative regionalism is to bring together a complex understanding of regional bodies, their origins, objectives, membership, achievements and challenges. Justifications for comparative regional studies are many. It allows for a more holistic understanding of regionalism and regional bodies. It allows us to identify what is specifically distinctive about a regional organisation, and what are similar and comparable elements. It also provides a space where practitioners, policy-makers and scholars can engage with each other, exchange experiences, and possibly learn from “best practices” or “policy failures” (Murray & Warleigh-Lack, 2013, p. 112).

The comparative approach provides useful evaluation tools regarding crises. For the purpose of this essay, we draw on the definition of crises as “historical moments of surprise, compressed time, decision and choice. They are turning points that disrupt established orders, goals and expectations, driving leaders to respond defensively or by innovation to protect or extend regimes” (Gillespie, 2015, p. 85). Some scholars

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have focused on the impact of external crises such as financial, economic and security crises on regional organisations (Schimmelfennig, 2018). Others have examined endogenous factors that create crises within a regional body and thus have impacted its institutional structures, governance, coherence, legitimacy, and effectiveness (Hettne, 2002). In one form or another, crisis has played an important role in the creation and development of regional bodies around the world. Some scholars illustrated the resilience of regionalism, whereby the response to a crisis serves to deepen regional cooperation; others see evidence of disintegration, for example, with regard to the EU (Dinan et al., 2017). The war in Ukraine saw NATO gain more relevance in the new security landscape with the expansion of its membership base. The crisis that unfolded in Libya in 2011 witnessed the African Union (AU) struggle to speak as one on how to resolve the crisis, illustrating the institutional weaknesses of the organisation in finding “African solutions to African problems” (Kasaija, 2013). The Arab League has “been paralysed by internal strife in times of crisis like the 1990 Kuwait War, the 2003 Iraq War, the Summer War in 2006, the 2009 Gaza War” (Valbjorn, 2016, p. 264). Regarding Latin America, Agostinis and Nolte (2023, p. 119) argue that crises have resulted in “institutional inertia” rather than deepening regional integration. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has faced significant crises such as the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997–99; Myanmar’s approach to the Rohingya; the South China Sea territorial dispute; and non-traditional security threats such as counter-terrorism, disaster relief, pollution, and other environmental threats (e.g. Narine, 2016).

Fit for Purpose?

A persistent challenge is to develop a research agenda for effective comparative regionalism with comparative methods. How can we, as scholars, navigate our way around the multiple arrangements to undertake a comparative study of regional bodies? How wide a net should be cast when comparing regional bodies in terms of numbers? What is the optimal number of bodies to compare? How might we compare the different regional groupings across the globe? Is it best to focus on areas of similarity, such as policy areas, regional design, and decision-making structures, or should comparisons encompass points of difference among regional bodies to understand how and why they differ (Dosenrode, 2015)? Are some aspects of regional bodies more useful to examine than others (Söderbaum, 2013)? These questions form part of the mosaic of comparative regionalism studies (De Lombaerde et al., 2010; Murray & Warleigh-Lack, 2013). We address them below in our call for a more global involvement of scholars across the Global North and Global South. We suggest that they remain pertinent for scholars of comparative regionalism, particularly when it comes to crises.

Regional bodies are products of history, governance structure, and core values of their constituent states. The geographical, economic, political and security contexts within which a regional body develops significantly influence how it is established,

its core values, governance, functions, and how it will respond to crisis situations. Exogenous factors (such as the role that external or great powers and external threat perceptions play in driving regionalism) and endogenous factors (such as national sovereignty, the commitment and leadership of founding members to the process of regionalism, and internal divisions and crises) drive the different processes of regionalism (Hettne, 2002; Murray, 2015). They also determine whether—and how—power, authority, or competence is transferred from the state to the regional body.

Scholars seek to develop a deeper understanding of commonalities and differences among regional bodies and contribute to the study of regionalism more broadly. We contend that there is no ideal regional body, and contest any remaining suggestion that the EU constitutes a model for other regional bodies. Although prominent scholars worked on regionalism in Latin America and Africa from the 1960s (e.g. Haas & Schmitter, 1964), there has been a perception of the centrality of, and exceptionalism about the EU, that has unfortunately, on occasion, promoted the EU as a paradigm against which to assess other forms of regionalism (Acharya, 2016; Söderbaum, 2013), resulting in a form of integration snobbery (Murray, 2010).

The idea of a *model* remains problematic. It assumes a certain type of best practice. It implies a flatpack, off-the-shelf approach to regionalism that fails to take into consideration the specificities of each regional body. Such an approach must be avoided. Comparing more diverse regional bodies helps us move away from any Eurocentric dominance and a perception of a specific regional body as best practice. Non-EU regional bodies themselves often seek to avoid the EU as a comparator or model. Although referred to as a source of inspiration (Pitsuwan cited in Kotani, 2016) or reference point (Wong, 2012), for ASEAN, the EU is not perceived as a model, but as a cautionary tale, particularly regarding the financial crisis and Brexit (Allison-Reumann & Murray, 2017). Indeed, many studies of Asian regionalism do not make any reference to the EU.

Only through a close observation of the experiences of different regional bodies, their institutional or architectural designs, and the nature of their cooperation can we understand how regionalism has evolved and identify both core drivers and impediments to regionalism and principal similarities and differences. It also allows us to identify better if any elements of European integration “are more comparable to other regions” (De Lombaerde et al., 2010, p. 744) instead of discounting the EU completely. All these factors contribute to our understanding of how different regional bodies respond to crises.

Since the late 1950s, regionalism research has focused not only on Europe but also on Latin American regionalism (e.g. Avery & Cochrane, 1973; Haas & Schmitter, 1964). Scholars need to acknowledge where and how Europe has been dominant and the moves taken to challenge this. In focusing on regionalism and crisis, we note that non-EU regional bodies may seek to avoid the EU as a comparator or a model. Some regard the EU’s approach to some crises as the opposite of a model and as attempting too much regionalism or as over-institutional (Allison-Reumann & Murray, 2017).

There are three ways a perception of Eurocentrism can be avoided. The first is to ensure that a substantial number of experts from non-European universities and institutes are conducting comparative regionalism studies. We concur with Duggan

et al., (2021, pp. 3–4) regarding the need to contribute to “disrupting the hegemonic knowledge around” Africa-EU interregionalism to enrich “the scholarship, and bring new perspectives with implications for its future.” They undertook this in their edited volume by “engaging a diversity of scholars, including African scholars outside of the *usual suspects*.” The second is to avoid an assumption that the EU is successful and has effectively managed its major crises, as this is open to debate. There is a growing body of literature that reflects this. Thirdly, and crucially, it is important to challenge the idea that the EU constitutes a model for other regional bodies. Such an assumption smacks of integration snobbery (Murray, 2010) and could be associated with a form of European arrogance and colonial stance that is not helpful (Acharya, 2016; Murray, 2010). In suggesting a particular starting and end point, this could result in a teleology, so we need to be aware of the uses and abuses of the concepts and understandings of regionalism (Murray, 2009), so that they are dynamic, aware of the perceptions and stances of those who lead these regional bodies. Regional bodies are not simply the object of research by scholars. They are decision-making arenas of policy actors from national, transnational and supranational levels of governance, involving lobby groups, civil society actors, advocates, businesses and trade unions in many cases.

Secondly, the study of comparative regionalism remains pertinent. While acknowledging that there are significant differences, we observe similar drivers and impediments of regionalism which shape regional bodies and their development. These might include economic and especially trade imperatives; the influence of dominant powers; conflict among constituent states, and the desire for reconciliation, whether post-violence or to avoid future conflict. By comparing regional organisations, scholars and practitioners can better understand how these drivers or impediments enable regional bodies to respond to crises.

Thirdly, we suggest that the study of comparative regionalism can be rendered more fit for purpose the more it broadens and deepens its research agendas by focusing on how regional bodies tackle global challenges and regional crises such as forced migration, conflict resolution, climate challenges, organised crime, pandemics, terrorism, maritime security, and cybersecurity threats. We are cognisant of the limitations inherent in national and multilateral responses to crises that are increasingly transnational in nature. A multilateral response is not always possible due to a lack of consensus among states, including regarding the scope of the crisis or problem (Agostinis & Nolte, 2023; Fawcett, 2021; Hameiri, 2012). Further, some transnational issues are best addressed at a regional level as they affect specific regions differently. As experts in their own region, regional bodies can be better positioned to deal with a problem than international organisations. ASEAN speaks of the ASEAN Way, the African Union refers to its own approaches to conflict resolution and forced migration (Ncube, 2023), Mercosur has sought to manage its divisions across its continent, and the EU refers to guiding European values. Yet, we have also observed that, in some crisis situations such as the challenge of responding to and managing asylum seekers and refugees, regional bodies struggle to find effective solutions due to internal divisions among member states; lack of leadership; lack of flexibility and of capacity and little commitment to tackle the crisis (Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility

to Protect, 2022; Ripoll Servent, 2020; Tubakovic, 2019). Crises, both within and external to a regional body, can thus act either as a catalyst or an impediment in the process of region-building and the maintenance of regionalism. Understanding this helps us to better understand how effective regional bodies are and the necessary conditions for cooperation, and helps identify when regional organisations are—and were—better placed than international organisations to tackle transnational challenges, such as governance capacity, desire to tackle the problem with a regional solution, and effective leadership and resources.

There is thus scope to build on the existing literature that examines crisis response of regional bodies, not only in terms of how they respond but also what constrains their capacity to address crisis situations (Agostinis & Nolte, 2023; Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2022; Gillespie, 2015; Kasaija, 2013; Riddervold et al., 2021). The ability to play a role in a crisis can be constrained due to the nature of the crisis, the role or position of external powers and individual actions of constituent states. Yet, the common purpose driving the regional body, nurtured over the years through the establishment of frameworks or patterns of behaviour and norms, helps enable it to be a key actor in crisis response and management.

Furthermore, this focus allows us to better appreciate the many ways that regionalism has been manifested in response to threats and the way regional bodies define a crisis. There is thus scope to examine the varieties of regionalism in responses to crisis, whether such challenges threaten the economic well-being of the regional body and its member states, its security, whether through human-made or natural disasters, the health and well-being of its citizens and the environment, for example.

Research Agenda

The future research question can thus be articulated as: How effective are regional bodies in tackling crises? How might a research agenda be improved to examine this question?

A research agenda would examine the role and impact of crisis in shaping regionalism, and how and why the study of comparative regionalism is pertinent for understanding responses to crisis. There is scope to look back at how crisis situations have been investigated in comparative regionalism studies, as well as how they might be investigated in the future. There is no specific yardstick for comparison, as the crisis, the regional bodies and the question being asked will dictate different approaches. The resilience of regional bodies during periods of crisis and how they respond and adapt provides important lessons or may serve as cautionary tales for other regional bodies. COVID-19 provides a sound illustration of how different regional organisations responded to this global crisis. Whereas the EU, although slow to initially respond, played a pivotal coordinating role and established financial mechanisms to help mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic (Rhodes, 2021), others played limited (Gulf Cooperation Council) or insignificant (Arab Maghreb Union) roles

(Fawcett, 2021). ASEAN's responses were characterised by diversity and divergence (Spandler et al., 2023).

We recognise that this focus on crisis raises questions for scholars examining regional bodies. However, such a focus helps advance comparative regionalism research and understanding by not only scholars but also policy communities, civil society and stakeholders, practitioners engaged in Track 2 diplomacy, stakeholder meetings, epistemic communities and other forums regarding, for example, pandemics, transboundary health policy, currency crises, the Trump presidency, and traditional and non-traditional security issues. By contributing fresh knowledge to the varieties of existing regionalism, such research will help to open potential new pathways for future collaboration.

A research agenda that is fit for purpose would reflect fresh ideas, a vibrant transnational scholarly community, and collaborative scholarship, including greater collaboration between scholars from the Global North and the Global South. It would be interdisciplinary, bringing together scholars across disciplinary fields. A research agenda is as strong as its research team, and thus it is imperative to ensure not only interdisciplinary and transnational scholarly collaboration but to actively guarantee the participation of regionalism specialists who are based in, for example, Asian, African, Middle Eastern and South American universities and elsewhere, public services, businesses, non-governmental organisations and civil society. Funding is required to bring large and small networks of specialists from diverse regions and specialisations to research regional bodies comparatively, in order to identify the commonalities and distinctions in approaches to challenges. We seek comprehension of these provisions for effective regional studies, characterised by enhanced transnational—and transcontinental—cooperation, supported by more specific and targeted research and travel funding, and supported in pragmatic ways for access to Global North events, including visa assistance. Enhanced interaction among regional bodies effectively means monitoring and ensuring that there is no tokenism towards the Global South. It requires ensuring that funding schemes do not have restrictions or constraints placed on participants (regarding eligibility), and whether applicants can apply, due to the country they work in or their nationality. Here, we envisage the enhanced value of epistemic communities working together in knowledge creation and sharing. But this also has restrictions—while we have greater opportunity to link up via online mediums, it can still be difficult when meetings are organised in person, especially in the Global North, due to funding or travel restrictions (e.g. lengthy delays in obtaining visas).

We propose that, in order for comparative regionalism to remain fit for purpose when examining crisis situations, we need to consider how regionalism contributes to both global and regional problem-solving. Often, studies of regional bodies have focused on the impact of the crisis internally on a regional body. Although this remains worthwhile, greater attention should also be allocated to how regional bodies tackle specific crises within the broader regional and international context. With the increasing difficulty in obtaining international consensus on challenges such as the displacement of people, conflict resolution, climate challenges, organised crime, and

cyber security threats, for example, regional bodies have an important role to play in confronting transnational challenges.

Thus, there are two *fit-for-purpose* questions that require enhanced consideration: whether regional bodies are fit for purpose, and whether regionalism studies are fit for purpose. In order to focus on these, we need to examine the drivers, leaders, and forms of cooperation *within* regional bodies (and also *among* regional bodies in interregionalism) and with international organisations in responding to crises. We need to develop a framework to understand how and when regional bodies perceive a challenge to be a ‘crisis’, and the resources that they and constituent states utilise to handle the crisis. What are the lessons learnt from previous crises and the policy decisions of regional bodies? Can regional bodies consolidate actions taken during past crises, learn from past experiences, and forge more adaptive responses to similar crises? Finally, to what degree do regional bodies themselves learn from how other regional bodies have responded to similar crisis situations? Is there evidence of transregional policy learning? Such studies will both broaden and deepen the study of comparative regionalism.

Conclusion: Is the Study of Comparative Regionalism Fit for Purpose?

As research agendas deepen and broaden, the question can be asked whether scholars can be specialists on more than two or three regional bodies. A genuinely comparative approach must have several bodies, while seeking to avoid the danger of examining a large number with little practical comparative value and only a relatively superficial understanding of the issues and crises. Here, the approach that is fit for purpose is to bring together scholars from a range of diverse regional bodies and expertise, as indicated above.

We certainly see the value of this edited volume as potentially fulfilling that purpose. This collection presents an ideal opportunity to interrogate and explore the increasing interplay among and within disciplines in comparative regionalism, resulting in increased breadth and depth of conceptual development. The need for sustained dialogue among comparative regionalism specialists, specialists in the study of one regional body, and experts on one challenge or aspect of regionalism can all lead to fruitful collaboration across disciplines, regions, continents, and senior and junior scholars and actors.

We make the case that the study of comparative regionalism remains pertinent. Although no regional body is a model, given they differ in context, history, governance, legal and institutional structures, and their degree of regionalism, considerable knowledge can be drawn from interrogating the way they respond to, manage, and emerge from crisis situations, including the challenges of a Trump presidency.

We are pleased that comparative regionalism studies continue to interrogate past and present regionalism approaches, and look forward to continued and renewed collaboration.

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Essay 44: Outlining the Foundations for Regional Justice. A Conversation in Political Philosophy and Global Regionalism



Martina Chiara Tallarita and Patrik Baard

Introduction

In this essay, we propose that the concept of *region* enables reflection on political obligations beyond state borders. We start by analytically exploring the normative principles underpinning regionalism from a theoretical perspective. Our ambition is to outline the foundations of why political authorities belonging to the same geographical region ought to enter into collaboration as a matter of justice in ways that can supplement, rather than replace, existing principles of justice that are often either domestic or global.

In regionalism studies, normative questions of justice concerning the creation of a region and the political obligations between its members are rarely addressed. Conversely, political philosophy, a field of political thought where normative issues are conventionally brought to the fore, has rarely devoted any attention to regionalism. This does not mean, however, that normative questions in regionalism studies are irrelevant or that the region cannot constitute a valuable analytical focus in political philosophy.

We position ourselves within the literature in political philosophy, traditionally focusing either on national or global scopes of justice and dividing normative matters concerning a region and its members into two types. First, establishing a region implies a certain degree of interdependence among its members, shared interests, and

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_44

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collective responsibilities that transcend national borders. Second, various specific duties can arise and be justified in different regional contexts. While the first type of question concerns the reasons why regions ought to be established, the second concerns obligations that arise once regions have been formed.

In this essay, we first explore the normative status of regions, as well as the existence of regional obligations. We investigate whether elements such as shared identities or resources can justify the existence of some principles of regional justice.

Political philosopher David Miller (2013) briefly remarks on the possibility of political obligations arising from economic cooperation at the transnational level. We will engage with this remark. By exploring two arguments for what can be called regional justice, here referring to obligations between political units that, even if having separate sovereignty, are part of the same geographical region, we suggest that putting political philosophy and global regionalism studies into dialogue can mutually benefit both disciplinary fields. Justice within a region is mainly addressed in distributive terms. Nonetheless, due to the strong interconnection between distributive and relational aspects of justice, we do not sharply separate the two spheres (as in Anderson, 1999). By utilising the concept of justice, we outline how justified expectations that regionally connected actors collaborate can be formed. That is, they *ought* to enter regional collaborations as a matter of justice. On the one hand, our reflection enriches regionalism studies with a transformative approach to normative discussion in that it aims to foster a more integrated understanding of shared normative concerns. On the other hand, it focuses on a spatial and relational concept commonly used in political practice but rarely discussed in political philosophy. We demonstrate how specific instances of regional and interregional relations offer valuable cases for expanding the scope of distributive and relational justice beyond state borders without necessitating the sudden leap to a fully global framework.

Neglecting the Normative Status of Regions

The locus of attention in political philosophy has conventionally been on principles of cosmopolitan (Caney, 2005), national (Miller, 2013), or communitarian (Kymlicka, 2002) justice—regardless of whether the topic is distributive or procedural justice, or recognition. Thus, very little attention has been devoted to the concept of regions, despite their practical political importance. Adjacent discussions in political philosophy concern the general relations between states rather than specifically neighbouring states or between states and different groups of citizens within that state. When the focus is placed on relations between states (for instance, Rawls, 1999), regions play no predominant or unique role compared to local communities, individual states, or the global community.

Consider, for instance, principles of distributive justice. The central issues are usually which, how, and amongst whom resources, burdens, and benefits ought to be distributed. These are often limited to domestic cases within nations or discussions of global justice where justice concerns distribution between nations. States, in line

with their territorial sovereignty rights, can freely adopt self-imposed obligations of distributive justice that extend beyond their own citizens. Likewise, individual nation-states within regions are free to enter into or abstain from agreements with neighbouring states according to mutually agreed regulations. However, this is not different from the case in which a state enters an agreement with any other state, even one that is not geographically part of the region. *Region*, therefore, plays no special normative role in the principles of distributive justice.

Similarly, when principles of justice are international or cosmopolitan, a neighbouring state plays no special normative role.¹ Since cosmopolitan principles of justice generally attribute no particular importance to geographical proximity, much work would be required to justify limiting such principles to regulate the relations between neighbouring states rather than having a global reach. That is, usually, principles of justice are either domestically limited or globally extended. Regions, as opposed to their member states, do not play any positive normative role with respect to either set of principles. Justifications concerning political obligations typically prioritise duties among compatriots for several reasons. However, when it comes to extending obligations of justice beyond state borders, several challenges arise, including considerations of distance and the degree of association of the parties involved (see Moellendorf, 2002).

In domestic politics, the concept of region has received more attention. Still, even if including issues such as power and justice, analyses that clarify and unpack political regions have often been predominantly descriptive (Varró & Legendijk, 2013). Since the concept is used in different ways, a conceptual and clarificatory discussion is needed. According to Jones and Paasi (2013), for geographers, regions primarily refer to a sub-state unit. In contrast, for International Relations scholars, it refers to supra-state institutional arrangements (Jones & Paasi, 2013, p. 2). As examples, Jones and Paasi mention economic arrangements, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) or the Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR). Here, we focus on regions understood as consisting of separate sovereign states, and it is to such entities that the potential principles would apply.

The practical use of regions and the existence of regionalism studies, combined with the silence in political philosophy regarding discussions of this unit, suggest that something special about regions has been overlooked and needs further investigation. Below, we will make a first attempt to outline how regions' characteristics may have some normative impact related to the two issues identified above, namely, reasons for sovereign states to enter regional collaborations as a matter of justice, and how sovereign entities ought to act when regional collaborations have formed.

¹ An exception in this sense is constituted by regional systems of human rights, such as those established by the African Union and the European Union. Their involvement, however, is often limited to receiving and addressing complaints, and scholars like Grote (2024) have highlighted a growing trend of institutional weakening within these systems.

Affirming the Normative Status of Regions

Are there regional obligations? That is, are there demands on separate individual states towards their neighbouring states merely arising from the fact that they are part of the same region and thus share geographical proximity? Intuitively, parallels between individual subjects and norms towards their neighbours may form analogies that support the justification of regional obligations. Even if cultural norms are at play, we can expect neighbours to act in specific ways by living adjacent to each other. However, can such obligations be justified on a political level regarding neighbouring states? The discussion concerning such obligations benefits regionalism studies with normative discussion as well as a political philosophy by highlighting a concept used in political practice that has received little attention in political theory.

There are good reasons for putting the normative aspects of regions under scrutiny. Should there be regional obligations, they potentially affect some of the territorial rights of sovereign states. Such obligations would form a justified expectation that individual sovereign states have obligations towards their neighbouring states as a matter of justice. This may, in turn, affect virtually all policy areas.² In addition to or as included in the rights of jurisdiction, the right to the territory's resources, and the right to control borders (Miller, 2012), sovereign states have control over their economic policies. Regarding regions, a sovereign state should ideally be free to enter into agreements with other states. In the real world, pragmatic constraints regarding power asymmetries and relations of asymmetric interdependency can result in a state entering a regional association with some neighbouring states, forming something similar to adapting preferences. Nonetheless, the mere fact that another nation lies in geographical proximity does not imply the conclusion that a state ought to enter into an agreement or behave in specific ways towards that state.

As stated above, it seems reasonable that the notion of regional obligations can be interpreted in at least two different ways: (1) they can constitute the basis for justified expectations according to which states that are placed in a particular geographical zone set up some form of regional arrangement; (2) they can guide the conduct of sovereign entities when a region has been established. Since both cases imply potential consequences on the sovereignty of states, we believe that normative scrutiny is both appropriate and much needed.

The concept of region can be understood differently by adopting different analytical foci. For instance, it has been suggested that a *region* can be defined ecologically in ways that are fruitful for understanding resource sovereignty (Baard, 2024). That is, what sovereign states are at liberty to do with the natural resources within their territory (Miller, 2012), and where ecological and political, social, cultural, and economic understandings of regions can be balanced with constrained resource

² An interesting case here is Antarctica, where seven states have territorial claims. Not all of these states are geographically part of the same region, but become part of the same region on Antarctica (see Baard & Mancilla 2024 for a discussion on Antarctica, which includes the concept of regions). If regional obligations hold, then at the very least those seven states have obligations pertaining to Antarctica.

sovereignty (Baard, 2024). Whether we take on a functionalist or a constructivist approach to the region, we must deal with space and relations. According to Fawcett (2004), a region can be identified through a territorial definition or as a zone where regular behaviour patterns among members are detected. Going further with a social constructivist approach, regions have been conceptualised as “social constructions that make references to territorial location and to geographical or normative contiguity” (Börzel & Risse, 2016). According to Börzel and Risse, this definition encompasses both a domestic and a global perspective and allows a broader understanding of the concept of region. Moreover, the fact that this approach strongly emphasises the role of shared history and identity in shaping a region makes it particularly fit for our exploration and, in general, for reflections on regional justice.

Problems concerning distributive equality of resources, opportunities, and benefits of states and communities involved in regional organisations have often been considered within regionalism studies (e.g. Hettne, 1999; Hurrell, 2007), even though from a perspective that is more similar to those adopted in International Relations than in political philosophy. Conventionally, sovereign states control their domestic economic policies and are free to enter or reject entering relations with neighbouring states as long as a state makes a decision in a democratic manner.

According to some views in political theory (particularly neo-republicanism as in Pettit, 1997, which also seems to prevail in domestic politics), state obligations are considered to be restricted primarily to its population. The alternative, according to others, would be coercive transnational political institutions (Miller, 2013) or cosmopolitan principles of justice that apply to all (Caney, 2005). A country’s citizens are, after all, those who are directly subjected to the state’s power and more directly part of some kind of social contract. However, as noted in a remark by political philosopher David Miller, “where we find forms of economic cooperation arising at the transnational level or where people begin to acquire new identities, say of a regional kind, then the scope of distributive justice will also enlarge even in the absence of coercive political institutions” (Miller, 2013, p. 164). The scope of distributive justice may not reach cosmopolitan levels, but it will not necessarily be constrained to the domestic sphere.

Though Miller does not expand on this point, his remark could provide the core justification for regional obligations. It seems intuitively reasonable that sovereign states’ obligations are not fully constrained or limited to their population. To elaborate on this intuition, it is important to recognise that the actions of one state will have effects on other states, with their impact likely being greater on neighbouring states than on those farther away. From a social constructivist perspective, Miller (2013) reiterates that neighbouring states can often share identities.

Consequently, a possible justification of distributive justice linked to Miller’s intuition is the hypothesis that if identities became more regionally constituted across nation-states, then principles of distributive justice would expand to include citizens of other states belonging to the region. This expansion would occur without the need for transnational coercive political institutions, to which Miller objects and which he sees as the only feasible alternative to the principles of justice being limited to

the nation-state. This justification could provide the seeds for arguments for both establishing a region and prescribing conduct once regions have been established.

However, it is questionable whether this argument holds ground. Even if it plays a central part in many of Miller's principles of domestic justice (Miller, 2013), it is difficult, among other things, to make a case for limiting obligations to only members of one's domestic state without resting on arbitrary grounds. This would motivate cosmopolitan principles.³ Stated differently, it seems severely problematic to base obligations of justice on shared identities in the first place, even when limited to domestic cases. Second, the construction of identities is a complex issue, and it is difficult to envision how regional identities would develop and possess similar, albeit contested, normative forces as national identities. That is, even if identity had a reasonable normative force in the domestic case, it is not certain that, at the regional level, it could evolve in the way proposed by Miller.

Another potential argument for regional economic obligations rests on shared resources. One territorial right is resource sovereignty, whereby a sovereign state has an exclusive mandate to exploit the natural resources within its borders as it wishes, conditional upon not impacting other states' natural resources. Against this, Miller pits forms of global redistribution based on equal original ownership of the Earth (Miller, 2012, p. 264). As often happens, the choice in principle seems to be between domestic and cosmopolitan principles.

Miller suggests several reasons justifying the limitation of resource sovereignty to sovereign states. Miller notes that resources are not merely there but must be discovered, extracted, processed, and traded (Miller, 2012, p. 264). Furthermore, there are rights to the extracted resources which justify domestic authority over them. First, how a nation has used resources greatly impacts both social and economic character. The extraction process, for instance, may have impacts on employment structures. Second, Miller bases the rights to what is extracted on "trans-historical identities," which encourage their sustainable use (Miller, 2012, p. 264; Rawls, 1999).

What Miller neglects is not only the insufficiency of such identities but also that resources—usually natural resources—often transverse the borders of nation-states. This has prompted discussion on regional ecological obligations, according to which there may be good sustainability reasons for collaboration based on ecological regions to be defined in some non-arbitrary way (Baard, 2024). There are also possible instrumental reasons for collaborating. For instance, one state that manages to extract and process natural resources can collaborate with a neighbouring entity to increase its competition in trade. They both learn and become better at extracting and processing, which benefits trade with other states. A stronger normative argument is, however, that since ecological regions are not limited to the boundaries of states, there are imperatives for nations extracting and processing natural resources to collaborate and do so sustainably.

While there are many possible reasons to question the proposed arguments, at the very least, they show that there are possibilities for justifying regional obligations.

³ Since we do not have space to recount that critique here, we refer interested readers to Caney (2005) for a critical discussion.

For instance, regional identity can give rise to expanding the principles of distributive justice, but is fraught with several shortcomings. The fact that economies are often built on resource extraction, processing, and trade, which, to Miller, justifies rights to that which is extracted, could also be used as an argument for regional economic obligations if—as is often the case—those ecological regions that can be transformed into resources transverse the boundaries of nation-states.

While it is difficult here to argue for how strong regional obligations would be relative to other territorial rights of sovereign states, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that regions form an analytical concept with normative aspects that ought to be uncovered.

Political Philosophy and Global Regionalism in Dialogue?

We have offered some initial thoughts to open a reciprocal dialogue between political philosophy and global regionalism. We aimed to display the existence of a fertile ground for framing and examining normative issues within regional contexts. This encounter deepens the scope of global comparative regionalism and provides a new terrain for discussion in political philosophy.

As previously stated, the frame of regional justice can provide a valuable middle ground for theorisation that goes beyond state borders but does not require committing to cosmopolitan views. Besides outlining the possibility and prospect of some notion of regional justice, this dialogue has the power to address crucial issues usually tackled from a generalised global justice perspective, particularly those related to North–South postcolonial relations. For instance, continent-to-continent relations between Africa (i.e. the African Union) and the EU are often framed as forms of interregionalism. In this context, especially when looking at the normative power exercised by the EU and cases of collision between contrasting norms (see Saltnes, 2021), some form of scaling up of regional justice as interregional justice would advance the debate.

Moreover, by touching upon the normative core of regional spaces and relations and by envisioning the possibility of regional obligations, we can give the appropriate weight to further contemporary questions emerging in global and comparative regionalism. For instance, the urgent problem of epistemic injustice and the hegemony of Eurocentric and Western-centric knowledge production could be addressed, at least partly, starting from endogenous conceptions of regional justice. This would directly confront the problem of coloniality and asymmetry of power (Haastrup, 2020).

While these are often raised as disciplinary problems within global regionalism, political and moral philosophy can help consider these issues from a perspective that is neither functionalist nor instrumental and that, above all, avoids the dichotomy between Western-centric International Relations and Western-oriented area studies (Acharya, 2014).

Another example of where normative analyses of regions can be beneficial concerns the disconnection between politics and economics constituted and regulated by normative premises, mainly contained in international law, which was pointed out by Kennedy (2013). The contrast between a polity that is still considered a community of people associated with a specific territory and an economy that is instead accepted as global may be somehow mediated by conceptualisations of regional justice as the meeting point between the two dimensions.

Moreover, the problem of Eurocentrism in regionalism studies is particularly pressing. Much of the existing literature and theoretical frameworks are derived from Western experiences and perspectives, which may not fully apply to other world regions. However, given the tight relation between these issues and problems of epistemic, distributive, and relational justice, it is hard to imagine alternatives to existing mainstream approaches in regionalism studies if the normative problems at stake are not part of the picture.

Conclusion

This short think piece has considered the potential for regions to provide a space for reflecting on political obligations beyond state borders. We first addressed and examined the neglect of normative questions in regionalism studies, as well as political philosophy's limited attention to regions. Then, we explored and proposed the normative status of regions and, therefore, the existence of regional obligations based on shared identities and resources. We suggested that regional identities and shared resources could justify the expansion of principles of distributive justice beyond state borders, at least at a regional level.

Eventually, we reflected on the establishment of a reciprocal dialogue between political philosophy and global regionalism studies. We pointed out a few of the ways in which this dialogue can enhance both fields and showcased how it can help address crucial contemporary issues emerging in global and comparative regionalism.

In conclusion, this essay suggests a re-conceptualisation of political obligations within regional spaces and relations and highlights the practical and theoretical value of such a shift. Regionalism can, in theory and practice, contribute to more resilient, equitable communities and a more just global order by providing new grounds to imagine mutual obligations among neighbouring states. While potential tensions may arise between domestic, regional, and global justice (for instance, in relation to conflicting priorities or competing values), regions can serve as complementary building blocks for reimagining global justice, supplementing rather than replacing it.

Acknowledgements Patrik Baard's contribution to this article was part of a project which received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 948964).

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Essay 45: Global Regionalism and Interregionalism



Frank Mattheis

Introduction

The impulse to globalise the study of regionalism (Bilgin & Futák-Campbell, 2021) implies that the world of regionalism is larger and more complex than conventional tools of regional integration derived from one region allow us to grasp. The main challenge has been to bring concepts and theories of regionalism from the Global South in order to avoid the study of regionalism being dominated by the experience of European integration. In most parts of the world, nation-states, institution-building and bordering practices operate according to logics that sometimes differ substantially from those conceived in Europe since the formation of the Westphalian order (Acharya, 2014). Neither ideals of supranationalism nor pooled sovereignty have been captured empirically with sufficient scope to understand how regional orders are formed in much of the Global South. This essay will deal with the phenomenon of interregionalism, which poses a particular challenge to global regionalism. First, the conceptualisation of interregionalism needs to go beyond the external relations of the European Union (EU), and second, it requires bringing together understandings from regionalisms from two different regions.

Concepts of Interregionalism

Interregionalism refers to deliberate interactions between existing regionalisms (Ribeiro Hoffmann & van der Vleuten, 2024). In the same way as the shape and purpose of regionalism is more malleable than the nation-states it transcends, the

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_45

shape and purpose of interregionalism is also more malleable than the regions it transcends (Buzan & Waever, 2003). Due to the proliferation of regionalism around the world, interregionalism has become a frequent phenomenon, whether the regionalisms involved are nested, overlapping or adjacent, collaborative or antagonistic (Doidge, 2007).

Conceptually, interregionalism comprises a wide range of cross-border interactions (De Lombaerde et al., 2015; Hänggi et al., 2006). It can be initiated by two already existing regional projects (e.g. EU-Mercosur) or take place as a format that transcends conventional regional delimitations (e.g. South Atlantic security cooperation) (Abdenur et al., 2016).

Whether as external relations of regionalism or as the nucleus of a new region, interregionalism remains a fragmented process. In each process, various actors engage in interregional activities but seldom follow a common grand notion of interregionalism. Its actual shape and content change rapidly and even play out in contradicting forms. It can gain significant importance in periods of regional transition and crisis as a basis that might eventually turn into a new regionalism. This has been the case with the end of the Cold War, leading to EU enlargement, but also at subsequent moments of crisis in multilateralism, such as the prolonged crisis of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), leading to interregional commercial agreements.

The decision in favour of a specific interregional institution and the selection of areas to be negotiated constitute a complex process. The conceptual challenge is to combine the influence of external ideas and paradigms with the composition of elites and government interests.

Most theories and concepts of regionalism have been derived from integration as an inward-looking process, where interactions and projects are driven between actors in the region and aim to shape the region. The external entanglement of regionalism has played a secondary role in theorising, even if most, if not all, regional organisations reflect on their current and aspired position in the global order, and seek to influence globalisation processes (Engel et al., 2025). However, most approaches to regionalism implicitly or explicitly contain concepts that are relevant to interregionalism. The neofunctionalist concept of *engrenage*, for instance, refers to a rapprochement of national political elites towards shared visions (Schmitter, 1970). When transferred to an interregional setting, *engrenage* can refer to regional political elites developing a sense of community across regional borders, as evidenced in the relevance of the framework of the Global South for many interregional encounters, starting with the Bandung Conference and carried on in the G77. Intergovernmentalist scholars have also argued for the importance of domestic interests in determining intergovernmental structures and negotiations (Schimmelfennig, 2018). Especially as economic and security arrangements often involve an interregional dimension, a regional interest that is more than the sum of national foreign policies.

Interregionalism primarily results from the worldwide proliferation of regionalism, which makes it difficult for regionalisms not to define their position vis-à-vis other regionalisms. The increase in interregional connections has also raised questions about diffusion, for instance, related to free trade agreements (Solís et al., 2009). The concept of emulation puts an emphasis on detecting whether interactions lead

to regionalism, copying integration strategies from other regions, and when they are deemed successful (Reiss, 2022). However, the loose network connecting the regional organisations does not indicate that this happens in a coordinated and comprehensive manner. Global institutions, such as the WTO (WTO, 2025) and the UN's Pact for the Future (UN, 2024), are supportive of regionalism but do not prescribe a particular form of regionalism.

A Global Approach to Interregionalism

What could it mean to apply a notion of global regionalism to the study of interregionalism? A central element is that knowledge production about regionalism in the margins needs to be incorporated into the canon of regionalism. When concepts are transferred from one context to another, they acquire a more complex and nuanced meaning. Social, economic and political spaces overlap in multiple ways, and so do identities and loyalties of their communities. And there are also multiple ways in which national borders are contested, deconstructed, and renegotiated into or by regional projects and practices.

The study of interregionalism originated along two empirical premises. First, there has been a steady and remarkable expansion of the European Union's (EU) global actorness (Hettne, 2013). The EU's presence in global governance, its institutional capacity and its recognition by other international actors have been remarkable. Second, although the number of treaty-based regional organisations across the globe has continuously grown, interactions between them have remained limited, especially if there is no geographic overlap between them.

Accordingly, the study of interregionalism has long been synonymous with the study of the EU's external relations. Global regionalism does not need to question the relevance of these premises, but it can expand the ontology of interregionalism. Regional organisations outside the EU might have an institutionally less developed external dimension, but they possess structures, ambitions, and practices for global engagement. Regional organisations outside the EU also tend to have more porous and malleable delineations, which means that the differences between what is regional and what is external are often blurred and need to be conceptualised differently. Reshaping concepts and experimenting with them is a way to enter into dialogue with the global world to capture regionalisms and interregionalisms that do not neatly fit into established categories.

Global regionalism raises the questions of how binary understandings of inclusion and exclusion can be bridged, how new delineations of the global can meaningfully challenge preconceived imaginations of states and regions, and how methodologies can be based on reciprocity and give attention to projects and practices alike.

Global regionalism, therefore, faces a twofold challenge that it needs to master simultaneously. It not only has to work on deducting concepts from non-Western contexts and extrapolating them to a more generalisable level, but it also needs to engage with concepts that have been developed from a Western perspective, transfer

them to non-Western contexts, enhance their usefulness and explanatory value in such contexts, and finally transfer them back into Western knowledge centres. To study interregionalism would, for instance, mean to bring EU-derived concepts of supranational diplomacy to a post-colonial setting and enrich them with the practices of the external engagements found there.

The Role of the European Union for Interregionalism

The EU plays a particular role in interregionalism, as it has been active since the early 1990s in providing paradigms, tools and incentives to other regional projects. Regional organisations outside of the EU often do not have effective mandates, instruments, or even agendas to conduct interregional relations with third parties. They seldom actively promote a certain model. As a result of the EU dominance, the only interregional instrument in an organisation of the South might be donor management. For the EU, interregionalism occurs in terms of political dialogue and, in the case of relations with the Global South, development aid. Financial dependency on an external actor can push a regional organisation to develop in a certain institutional direction or along a thematic focus. Aid-receiving regionalisms might even anticipate this constellation by setting up an agenda that increases the odds of receiving donor funding. Through these interactions, the EU is also the organisation that regional policy makers in the rest of the world are most familiar with. This results in striking similarities in the organisation of regional organisations such as the Andean Community, Mercosur or the African Union. This resemblance can, however, be misleading, as most regional organisations do not implement a supranational structure and proceed with a very selective adaptation of external models in their practice of integration. Regional organisations across the world have pursued plans to create regional courts of justice and regional parliaments. At first glance, these plans are puzzling, as they are at odds with prevalent norms of national sovereignty in the Global South. The EU's interregionalism might contribute some explanations, but institutional developments always need to be contextualised within regional dynamics (Telò, 2009).

A limiting factor in the study of interregionalism is to focus on an asymmetry between the EU as initiator and driver and other regions as emulators, whether out of their own will or through means of coercion (Mattheis, 2021). Even if the theoretical approaches do not rely on the EU as a sole explanation for regionalisms in the rest of the world, it still constitutes a *prima facie* point of reference and has been embodied by concepts such as the “transformative power of Europe” (Börzel & Risse, 2009), which was coined by European scholars but gained prominence in other parts of the world. When confronted with regional organisations outside of Europe, there is a strong bias to start with the EU, assuming that it constitutes a blueprint, a source of ideas or a coercive force. From an empirical point of view, it can indeed be sensible to study interregionalism through the case of the EU (Baert et al., 2014). However, the role of the EU for other regionalisms should not be overplayed and met without

complacency (Malamud, 2010). Many regional organisations have been conceived according to logics that either differ from the EU's integration paradigm, such as *Cepalismo*, which proposed a different model and purpose of economic integration, or that are even antagonistic to it, such as the Russia-led EAEU and CSTO, which compete directly with the EU for members.

Consequently, the conventional EU-centric approaches might not provide a satisfying explanation for the spread of regional models, especially if they are not or only superficially based on the EU. Attempts by regional policy makers to learn from other regional organisations or even directly interact with them exist, but are often limited to specific technical aspects of integration (Hira, 2007). However, many regional organisations interact indirectly. If two regions are competing against each other for global recognition or market access to a third party, streamlining becomes more likely (Mattheis, 2010). Other interregional mechanisms in the South might be best understood as part of a larger hegemonic pattern where regions at the periphery of the world system interact (Wallerstein, 1979).

For a concept of interregionalism to be meaningful, it should, thus, not be reduced to a synonym of the EU's external presence. Conceptual lenses are needed to grasp interregionalism as a global phenomenon that goes beyond a singular case. It is necessary to investigate the relevance and influence of the EU on other regionalisms. First, the influence of other regionalisms on the EU needs to be considered in a reciprocal perspective. Whether intended or unintended, interregionalism has an impact on the agency, capacity, institutionalisation and structure of regionalisms on either end of the interaction (Mattheis & Wunderlich, 2017; Lopez Lucia & Mattheis, 2021). Second, it is important to identify and understand interregionalism mechanisms that do not include the EU as a dominant archetype and policy producer (Lechini & Morasso, 2021). This is not to suggest a separate conceptualisation of interregionalism in the Global South, but this approach rather opens the door for comparative work (Mattheis, 2014).

Conclusion

Engaging with interregionalism from a global regionalism entails cases without the EU to conceptualise in a manner that avoids many of the prescriptive and idiosyncratic pitfalls that have emerged from the practice of deducting interregional policies and practices from the EU model. However, global regionalism also needs to avoid creating a dichotomy in which these other, invariably less institutionalised forms of interregionalisms are juxtaposed against the European experience (Breslin et al., 2002). For analytical purposes, interregionalism needs to be interpreted as going beyond spatial containers that are formally predefined by regional organisations and treaties (Fawcett & Hurrell, 1995). Furthermore, adopting a global regionalism methodology is not limited to overcoming a Eurocentric case selection (Litsegård & Mattheis, 2023). It requires an approach that does not frame other interregionalisms as deviations from the EU's external relations, but rather the other way around. If

the EU is just one case of regionalism (Warleigh-Lack & Rosamond, 2010), the same applies to EU-led interregionalism. One final pitfall that a global regionalism approach needs to tackle is the dimension of time. The EU's development as an extra-regional actor is linked to a specific period that can give an ahistorical perspective on other regions. However, Europe has been as a latecomer in certain respects. To give one example, the African Union, the Arab League, and the Organisation of American States have had permanent missions to the United Nations long before the EU. Deviations in time should therefore be acknowledged in a reciprocal manner. The dichotomy of the EU against other regionalisms has been very misleading, as it neglects the characteristics of the EU as one of several regionalisms that engage on the international scene.

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Essay 46: Overlapping Regionalism: A New or a Delayed Research Agenda?



Burcu Ermeydan

Introduction

More than fifteen years ago, when I first chose regionalism as a research topic for my academic journey, I encountered a multitude of acronyms for regional institutions,¹ most of which were unfamiliar to me. I compiled a list detailing each, along with their geographical scope and political and/or economic focus. However, as the list grew longer, it became increasingly intricate and challenging to grasp because all listed regional institutions indicated more overlapping membership and policy competencies. As a junior scholar eager to learn more about regionalism, this was the first time I asked myself loudly, “Why are these regional institutions overlapping?”.

At that time, this question remained partially unanswered due to the limited number of studies focusing on the conceptual and analytical frameworks of regional overlaps within the borders of IR and specifically in regionalism literature. In a broader sense, regional overlap can be defined as the extent to which two or more regional institutions share a common geography and policy areas. Fortunately, more competent researchers in the field have recently conceptualised the phenomenon as *overlapping regionalism* with incipient analytical frameworks supported by qualitative and quantitative studies (See, e.g. Malamud, 2019; Panke & Stapel, 2018a, 2018b; Yeo, 2018). In its most basic form, overlapping regionalism refers to the phenomenon where multiple regional institutions coexist within the same geographic

¹ Around the world, there are numerous regional organizations, cooperation initiatives, arrangements, and groupings that influence regionalism, with or without formal institutional structures. In this essay, I prefer to use the term *regional institutions* as an encompassing term to cover all formal and informal regional institutions and arrangements that play an active role in shaping their regional settings.

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area and address similar policy areas. It occurs when regional states in a region simultaneously become members of more than one regional institution, leading to an intersection of these institutions' geographical reach and policy competencies. Accordingly, overlapping in terms of geography and mandate are two crucial features that define the phenomenon. This intersection causes similarities in the policy competence and spheres of influence of these regional institutions and creates a regional complex between them. Recent studies on overlapping regionalism have revealed that regional overlaps proliferated in the last 75 years (Panke & Stapel, 2023, p. 452).

This essay discusses the place of the notion of *overlapping regionalism* in regionalism studies. It questions why, as a topic that profoundly impacts contemporary regionalism and as a worldwide phenomenon, the scholarly interest in overlapping regionalism has surged recently. What is the place of overlapping regionalism in regionalism studies? How could our efforts to understand overlapping regionalism contribute to global regionalism studies in the future?

The Notion of Overlapping Regionalism

This essay perceives overlapping regionalism as both a conceptual framework to define regional overlaps among regional institutions and an analytical inquiry and perspective to study the phenomenon within the borders of regionalism studies. It argues that although regional overlaps became a prevalent phenomenon worldwide in the early 2000s, conceptualising and theorising it under the notion of overlapping regionalism is still delayed as a research agenda for regionalism studies. In this respect, many existing conceptual, theoretical, and methodological frameworks about regionalism are ill-adapted to define overlapping regionalism. Hence, the recent scholarly attention to overlapping regionalism is a delayed yet essential adaptation of academic inquiry to evolving global and regional realities. In that regard, the essay suggests integrating comparative regionalism perspectives, further refining theoretical frameworks, and employing quantitative methods to fill existing gaps in the literature.

As a phenomenon, *overlap* is not a novel concept for the IR discipline. Within the literature on International Political Economy (IPE), overlaps in terms of content and geographic scope of regional trade agreements have been important topics of discussion since the 1990s. It is frequently called the *spaghetti bowl* of trade agreements, as first coined by Jagdish Bhagwati (1995). However, by focusing on the economic rather than political aspects of the overlaps and possible outcomes of overlaps, the IPE literature has managed to avoid the problem of conceptual and theoretical contradictions regarding the phenomenon within the borders of regionalism studies. By pointing out the interaction among overlapping regional agreements, however, they were able to provide a perspective regarding regional complexities and thus offer a deeper understanding of the topic.

Specifically, within the IR discipline, some discussions have already aimed to develop perspectives toward institutional overlaps (See, e.g. Aggarwal, 1998; Alter &

Meunier, 2009; Young, 1996). These studies concentrated on the regime complexes that institutional overlaps created. However, these studies were not specifically about regionalism or regional institutions. Nevertheless, they have significantly contributed to the evolving literature on overlapping regionalism by highlighting forms of regime complexes that overlapping institutions created.

Until recently, within the context of regionalism literature, overlaps are mainly described as overlapping membership, referring to the multi-membership of regional states to more than one regional institution simultaneously. However, as some studies pointed out, overlaps among these regional institutions are not merely about membership, i.e., geography (Panke & Stapel, 2018a; Weiffen et al., 2013). Overlaps in terms of policy competencies are also apparent in most cases, meaning broader intersection and interactions among regional institutions to various extents and forms.

Moreover, as pioneering studies suggested, overlaps among regional institutions are a global phenomenon, which has shown a significantly increasing trend in the last three decades (Panke & Stapel, 2023). This trend is related to the proliferation of regional institutions after the end of the Cold War. For some regions like South America (Nolte, 2014; Weiffen et al., 2013), East Asia (Yeo, 2018), and Africa (Hartmann, 2018; Ribeiro, 2022), overlaps among regional institutions are an integral part of regional politics and regionalism. It is also observed in Europe, which hosts one of the most well-known examples of a successful regional integration process (Panke & Stapel, 2018b). The most well-known regional examples include the African Union and ECOWAS in Africa, ASEAN and APEC in East Asia, and MERCOSUR and UNASUR in South America. In brief, as a global phenomenon, regional overlaps create a complex structure in which different types of regional governance intersect. As a result, they create regime complexes through which regional politics and states' behaviour are affected and vice versa (Nolte, 2014). Hence, explaining regional overlaps only through multi-membership may not help to grasp the phenomenon. Because of the phenomenon's complexity, it requires a more profound understanding that focuses on the reasons, results, and characteristics of regional governance created by overlapping membership and policy competencies of regional institutions.

In the last decade, in the literature on regionalism, some pioneering studies have been conducted at regional and global levels in order to discuss the causes, consequences, and general patterns and to propose various taxonomies regarding overlaps to provide a better understanding of the overlapping regionalism (Nolte, 2014; Panke & Stapel, 2018a, 2018b; Weiffen et al., 2013; Yeo, 2018). Yeo (2018) highlights the causes and the potential risks of overlapping regionalism, particularly regional rivalry, while Weiffen et al. (2013) and Nolte (2014) propose an analytical toolkit in conjunction with regime complexity. Panke and Stapel (2018a, 2018b), on the other hand, focus on understanding the effects of the overlapping regionalism phenomenon through a holistic approach, mapping the overlaps in policy and geographic areas. Their contribution to the field is valuable not only for conceptualising the phenomenon but also for attempting to bring a theoretical inquiry into an already existing phenomenon within the borders of regionalism studies. At the same time, they revealed that as an integral part of practices of regionalism in different parts of the world, overlapping regionalism is not a new phenomenon. However, the

recent increase in studies on this topic indicates that it has only recently begun to attract the interest of researchers as a research subject.

Why Has Scholarly Interest in Overlapping Regionalism Surged Recently?

At this point, we need to ask, despite its importance and widespread presence world-wide, why has the scholarly interest in overlapping regionalism surged recently? What is the place of overlapping regionalism in regionalism studies? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to locate the overlapping regionalism within the field by touching upon the scholarly development of regionalism. In that regard, the development of regionalism can be examined by dividing it into three main strands as waves of regionalism that can be identified as the first, second, and third waves of regionalism.²

The first wave of regionalism was between the 1950s and the early 1980s. In this period, the first attempts were made towards regional integration in Europe, and regional organisations such as ASEAN in Southeast Asia, LAFTA in South America, and ECOWAS in Africa were formed in other parts of the world. The scholarly discussion in this period was heavily shaped by debates regarding deepening the regional integration and forms of regional entities in which state sovereignty would be transferred to supranational structures (See e.g., Haas, 1970; Lindberg, 1963; Nye, 1965). Undoubtedly, the European integration process has been a determining factor in the focus of these studies, while regional initiatives in other parts of the world followed different trajectories. Nevertheless, as a general assessment of regionalism during this period, regionalist projects had mostly an exclusive understanding of membership that restricted interaction with non-members. Therefore, during the first wave of regionalism, overlaps among regional institutions existed but were not prominent (Panke & Stapel, 2023, p. 454).

The second wave of regionalism is situated between the mid-1980s and early 2000s. The main concern of scholars during this period was comprehending globalisation's effects on regionalism and describing the changes in new forms of regionalism (See, e.g., Gamble & Payne, 1996; Hettne & Söderbaum, 1999). In this period, already existing theories on regional integration were questioned, while regional integration and regional cooperation were separated from each other. This conceptual

² In the literature, different terminologies and periodisation have been used to describe the development of regionalism. The most common classification includes *Old Regionalism*, *New Regionalism*, and *Comparative Regionalism* (see, e.g., Börzel & Risse, 2016; De Lombaerde & Söderbaum, 2013). However, as Söderbaum (2016, p. 30) also points out, various alternative terms such as *post-hegemonic*, *post-neo-liberal*, *heterodox*, and *fringe* have been used, particularly in the era of *Comparative Regionalism*. Throughout this article, for the periodisation, the term *first wave* will be used for the pre-1990 period, *second wave* for the period between 1990 and 2000, and *third wave* for the post-2000 period.

separation showed that since every regional cooperation process does not automatically require regional integration, regionalism should be considered from a broader perspective, including interaction with non-member states, global institutions, and regional entities in other regions with a diverse cooperation agenda ranging from economic to social.

Moreover, during this period, new regional institutions were established. As a result, many regional formations that overlap in terms of geography and policy areas were fundamentally established during this period (Panke & Stapel, 2023, p. 454). However, despite the increase in their numbers, overlaps among them were not carefully examined due to the primary focus of the studies during this period on other aspects of regionalism, such as encompassing interactions with non-member states, global institutions, and diverse regional entities. For this reason, regional overlaps were not a key research priority for the second wave of regionalism studies.

The third and current wave of regionalism started in the early 2000s. Söderbaum underlines (2016, p. 30) that a more multi-dimensional and pluralistic type of regionalism emerged in this current wave. Positioning their arguments on the idea that we live in a “world of regions” (as expressed by Acharya, 2007; Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Katzenstein, 2005), regionalism studies gained new momentum. In this period, studies on regionalism pose a diversity in terms of their primary focus, such as the uniqueness of each region, addressing topics such as the distinctiveness of each region, the interactions between different regions, the complex regionalism structures within a region, and the contrast between integration and disintegration.

Studies revealed that regional overlaps have been present in global politics for the last 75 years and became a prevalent phenomenon worldwide in the 2000s (Panke & Stapel, 2023, p. 454). This raises important questions: Why has this phenomenon, which existed in the pre-1990 period but has increased significantly since the mid-1990s, been overlooked in all three waves of regionalism studies, especially during the second wave and the early years of the third wave? Also, given that the third wave has embraced a broader analytical perspective incorporating global, regional, and interregional interactions, why has the scholarly interest in developing theoretical and conceptual explanations of regional overlaps, which emerged in the same period and are a crucial part of this multi-layered structure, surged recently? Especially in the early years of the third wave of regionalism, how multiple institutions coexist, compete, and cooperate within overlapping spaces has not been sufficiently theorised and conceptualised until the last decade. Therefore, I argue that although regional overlaps became a prevalent phenomenon worldwide in the early 2000s, conceptualising and theorising it under the notion of overlapping regionalism is still delayed as a research agenda for regionalism studies.

Defining overlapping regionalism as a delayed rather than a novel research agenda is crucial in addressing both its historical significance and its contemporary relevance. In an etymological sense, *delay* implies that something existed but was not recognised or addressed at the appropriate time, whereas *new* signifies something entirely original and previously unseen. From this perspective, defining overlapping regionalism as a delayed research agenda also acknowledges its novelty. However, it additionally allows for evaluating the phenomenon’s place within the historical

development of regionalism studies. Therefore, this essay is built upon the idea that the recent scholarly attention to overlapping regionalism indicates a delayed yet essential adaptation of academic inquiry to evolving global and regional realities. By emphasising delay rather than novelty, researchers can avoid treating overlapping regionalism as an isolated trend. By doing so, it becomes possible to reconsider the place of the phenomenon in regionalism studies, revise existing perspectives accordingly, and develop new analytical frameworks.

The first reason for the delay is closely associated with Eurocentric bias within the literature on regionalism. Despite being harshly criticised for a long time, regionalism was closely perceived with the Eurocentric view, prioritising regional integration (Söderbaum, 2013, p. 2). Indeed, as recent studies revealed, regional overlaps have been found in Europe (Panke & Stapel, 2018b, 2023). Yet, since Eurocentric regionalism theories mainly took the European Union's regional integration as a model, especially during the first wave of regionalism, many of these overlaps have been overlooked in theorising and conceptualising efforts of regionalism studies. Relatedly, when a region-wide overlap is seen in a region, this is perceived as an endemic situation in that region that hinders deeper integration and the formation of a supranational entity or close regional cooperation (Nolte, 2018). As a result, while regional overlaps are recognised as a key feature of contemporary regionalism, the tendency is to focus on their reasons and possible results as barriers to deeper regional cooperation or integration rather than developing comprehensive approaches to understanding regional overlaps. As a result, the perception and study of overlapping regionalism as a phenomenon within its own boundaries has been delayed.

Relatedly, and as the second reason for the delay in the research agenda, this perception inevitably created a state-centric approach towards regional overlaps, which hampered the detailed analysis of the phenomenon. Most research efforts are aimed at the question of why regional states decide to create overlapping regional institutions (See e.g. Nolte, 2018; Yeo, 2018). This state-centric perspective tends to focus on the behaviours of states in a way that overlooks the interaction among overlapping institutions and the possible implications of such interaction. Regional overlaps pose complex interactions between overlapping institutions, leading to cooperation, competition, or even contradictions that affect policy outcomes and regional stability (Nolte, 2014). Therefore, focusing primarily on states' decisions to create overlapping institutions limits the analysis by ignoring multidimensional and multi-layered analysis regarding overlaps. As a result, the more we look at the behaviour of states, the more we delay the chances of developing insight into the interaction among overlapping regional institutions.

The final reason for the delay is closely associated with the tendency to study regionalism mainly through single case studies, which limits the focus to a limited number of regional institutions instead of developing a research framework bringing them into the same spot. Since overlapping regionalism covers multiple regional institutions, an approach to regionalism that considers multiple cases and highlights the interaction among multiple of them is required. However, due to the methodological approach of regionalism studies focusing on a limited number of single

cases, it has not been possible to develop methodological frameworks to analyse many regionally overlapping cases simultaneously. In addition, widely used qualitative methods make it challenging to examine the interaction between many cases. However, in order to understand the effects of regional overlaps and the interaction between multiple cases, it would be more accurate to adopt approaches that require methods to rely on n-large analysis. As a result, until these methods were recently adapted to regionalism studies, studies revealing regional overlaps were delayed.

Overlapping Regionalism, Comparative Regionalism, and Global Regionalism

Regardless of the reasons for the delay, regional overlaps are still one of the defining features of contemporary regionalism. Some pioneering scholars working on this topic have conceptualised the phenomenon and proposed analytical frameworks that enable a better understanding of the causes, consequences, and types of overlap (See, e.g., Nolte, 2014; Panke & Stapel, 2018a, 2018b, 2023; Weiffen et al., 2013). However, even these promising efforts present deficiencies from a methodological point of view. In turn, these lacunas being dealt with will indeed serve the cause of a more effective study and comprehension of the phenomenon of overlapping regionalism.

First, the perspective of comparative regionalism needs to be integrated into overlapping regionalism studies. Most works dealing with overlapping regionalism rely heavily on case studies concerning single regions or a subregion (See, e.g., Hartmann, 2018; Nolte, 2014; Weiffen et al., 2013; Yeo, 2018).³ They offer insightful comments on analysing and interpreting the overlaps specific to the region they focus on. However, as we narrow down our focus to overlaps within a single region or subregion, this tradition tends to regard the patterns of overlap for a particular region as unique. Thus, captured patterns become rather hard to adapt to other regions. However, cross-continental comparisons beyond individual regions and subregions are necessary to grasp the phenomenon. In that regard, the comparative regionalism perspective can allow the unveiling of similarities and differences and enable a general theoretical framework to be built from such insight.

This would be a crucial step in developing theoretical frameworks because studies on overlapping regionalism still need analytical frameworks to analyse different cases. So far, most studies on overlapping regionalism rely on the Regime Complex Theory (RCT) (Nolte, 2014; Weiffen et al., 2013). However, one of the main challenges of the RCT in terms of overlapping regionalism is the fact that it is not fully integrated into regionalism studies. Therefore, in order to develop theoretical frameworks for overlapping regionalism, a toolkit must be created within the nexus of the theories of regionalism and the regime complex.

³ Ribeiro's (2022) study is an exception, focusing on overlapping regional organisations in South America and Africa from a comparative perspective.

Moreover, we generally focus on overlaps within a single region and the inter-organisational relationships within that region. Because of such an approach to overlaps, we usually tend to neglect the interaction of the regions with the global system. However, many regional institutions also have vertical relationships with global institutions, including the United Nations, the IMF, the WTO, and other regional development banks, which impact regionalism processes. Therefore, in addition to considering regional overlaps at the regional level, we also need to look at institutional overlaps and global-to-regional interactions at the global level.

Lastly, overlapping regionalism should be studied in combination with quantitative methods, easing the mapping of overlaps. Except for a few from Panke and Stapel (2018a, 2018b, 2023) and the Comparative Regional Organisations Project (CROP) (Jetschke & Münch, 2024), most of the existing studies on overlapping regionalism mainly rely on qualitative methods prioritising process tracing. However, overlaps often go beyond geographical overlaps and include overlaps in policy competencies and actions. This requires identifying the range and scope of overlaps through rigorous mappings of regional overlaps. For instance, among new methodological approaches, complex network analysis can map interactions between regional institutions and examine power dynamics with network theory. Thus, with the help of mapping strategies relying on quantitative methods, we cannot only identify the forms and scope of overlaps but also calculate the scale of overlaps.

Conclusion

Overlapping regionalism is a significant phenomenon within regionalism studies, reflecting the complexity and multidimensionality of regional overlaps. While it is a relatively recent focus of scholarly interest, regional overlaps are not a new problem but rather a delayed research agenda gaining prominence due to their increasing relevance in today's global context. Regional overlaps should thereby not just be seen in terms of geography but entail complex policy competencies and interactions between the regional and global institutions. This calls for the need to understand how regional institutions are interwoven and accreted to one another and their broad implications for global regionalism. Although pioneering studies have laid the groundwork, there remains a critical need for integrating comparative regionalism perspectives, refining theoretical frameworks, and incorporating quantitative methods to map better and analyse overlaps. Indeed, as the field further continues to unfold and shape its contours over time, it will be important for future research to build on such seminal work so that more extensive analyses can be done and greater insight fostered into the complex web of regional relationships in the global system. With reference to how Acharya (2012) calls comparative regionalism “a field whose time has come,” overlapping regionalism may be described as a new feature of contemporary regionalism that should require more attention from scholars working on regionalism.

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Essay 47: Bottom-Up, Affective Communities: The Deterritorialisation of Regional Security



John J. Hogan

Introduction

Geographic proximity has traditionally played a prominent role in International Relations (IR) theories that have been developed to understand the dynamics of regional security. The argument that war with neighbours—or a member of the same *neighbourhood*—is more likely than war with distant others has a heritage that stretches back many decades (Wallenstein, 1981, pp. 70–72). It found form in realism, the most influential IR theory of the past number of decades, in the claim that “the ability to project power declines with distance”, meaning nearby states “pose a greater threat than those that are far away” (Walt, 1985, p. 10). Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, realism and its claims regarding adjacency have experienced a resurgence, partly due to Mearsheimer blaming the West for attempting to turn Ukraine into “a Western bulwark on Russia’s border” (2022, p. 13).

For theories tailored towards regional security, proximity is even more important, given that their focus is generally concentrated on actors without the ability to project power across continents. Arguably, the most prominent of these today is regional security complex theory (RSCT). It retains but also broadens realism’s emphasis on structure by incorporating levels of international security below the international system, the most significant of which are regional subsystems or ‘complexes’ in which most of the security interaction is internal. While acknowledging the importance of international anarchy and polarity, à la realism, RSCT also affords a role to constructivist ideas by incorporating patterns of amity and enmity stemming from actors’ interpretations of the system and each other (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, pp. 40–41). Ample and rich scholarship has been built upon these foundations, with the flexibility of RSCT facilitating analysis of a wide variety of regional projects that

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_47

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incorporate non-state actors, as well as linkages that connect the regional with both the global and national levels (Söderbaum & Hettne, 2010).

Amid all this theoretical innovation, however, the importance of proximity has remained relatively uninterrogated. In *Regions and Powers*, in which the parameters of RSCT were advanced in most detail, Buzan and Wæver defined a regional security complex (RSC) as a territory in which there are “subglobal, geographically coherent patterns of security interdependence” (2003, p. 45). RSCs are formed from the interplay between the balance-of-power consequences stemming from anarchy and local geographic proximity. Adjacency is crucial for the security interaction that defines an RSC because many threats pose a greater danger from a shorter distance than they do from a longer one. However, the premise that security interaction is restricted by territory is conditional upon the power of its constituent units, with superpowers far less restricted by geography. At the “other end of the power spectrum are states whose limited capabilities largely confine their security interests and activities to their near neighbours” (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 46). This assumption regarding proximity’s crucial importance has been maintained by studies drawing upon RSCT and theories of regional security more generally over the years (Amable, 2022; Stivachtis, 2021).

Of course, the claim that proximity matters for understanding regional security is uncontroversial, as it makes intuitive sense and has plentiful empirical validation. However, theorising necessitates emphasising certain factors and diminishing others, creating the risk of ‘blind spots’ over significant factors. One variable being driven out from under the veil of relative obscurity by contemporary security trends is the formation of emotional bonds by *ordinary* individuals from outside the policymaking sphere with distant others. Its growing significance questions the relative importance of proximity for analysing regional security. The claim that people’s sympathy for the suffering of distant others can influence international security is not new. Versions of this claim are central to scholarship that links governments’ policies with voter preferences through mechanisms such as *democratic peace* (Geis & Wagner, 2011) or the *CNN effect* (Robinson, 2011). Nor is the claim that emotions play a crucial role in international relations entirely original. A vibrant field of scholarship exists that highlights the value of incorporating emotions into the analysis of IR (Koschut, 2014; Terzi, 2021). Nonetheless, a gap exists within these intersecting fields of scholarship when it comes to the bottom-up agency of citizens to influence regional security. In the above examples, the emotions felt by citizens are either something to be managed, for example, through democratic institutions or via media influence—or are not considered significant because only the emotions of elites are subjected to analytical scrutiny.

It is this lacuna that I address by focusing on citizen action from a bottom-up, emotions-based perspective, highlighting the influence that bonds shared between communities spread over large distances can have on regional security. I start by first discussing literature that privileges emotions in the study of IR and identifying the conceptual tools it provides. Next, I cover two case studies—the wars in Ukraine and Gaza—to illustrate the role that emotional linkages play in both conflicts. I conclude with some brief remarks on the implications for regionalism studies and future research.

Bottom-Up Affective Communities

One of the most influential studies on emotions and international security is Koschut's work on collectives, such as NATO or the EU, as emotional security communities (ESCs). Such groupings are guided by collectively shared emotion norms, where emotions are understood as "moral judgments about proper behaviour" and emotion norms are "intersubjectively shared emotional guidelines and conventions that can be learnt and expressed according to a given social situation" (Koschut, 2014, p. 536). Koschut argues that "emotion norms—the expression of appropriate emotions in a given situation—stabilise a security community during inter-allied conflict" (2014, pp. 533–536). Like much of the literature on emotions and IR, Koschut's work largely operates at the level of emotions expressed between policy elites and their institutions. In an attempt to counter this imbalance, recent studies have aimed to incorporate a *bottom-up* perspective by focusing on emotional articulations and bonds shared in local contexts between *ordinary* citizens (Hutchison et al., 2024).

Little attention, however, has been centred on collectives—which I have termed bottom-up affective communities (BUACs)—that emerge from emotional connections between 'ordinary' people that extend across multiple localities. In an era of hyperconnectivity, in which it has never been easier to bond with distant strangers, such transnational communities emerge with much greater frequency. Like an ESC, the connective tissue of a BUAC is the sharing of particular moral judgements in a given situation. Unlike ESCs, a BUAC is—at least predominantly—made up of non-elite individuals rather than policymaking elites. While some members might be more influential than others, and there may be forms of hierarchy in sub-cohorts, there is no overarching leadership structure, and they operate on a bottom-up basis. Since the focal point for membership is primarily emotional rather than ideological, members may also hold a much wider range of worldviews than might be the case for a community based on ideology. That is not to say a BUAC is an ideology-free entity, but rather to highlight that the emotional connection to an issue, object or individual is more important than a codified worldview. Although one of them has a much more explicit ideological underpinning, white nationalists and Taylor Swift fans both constitute BUACs. Both are transnational communities that lack an overall leadership structure and are built around the moral appraisal of particular entities; though one is hatred of certain people, and the other is adoration of an individual.

Another commonality between BUACs and ESCs is the stabilising effect of emotion norms on the community. However, because of the bottom-up and often ideologically diverse nature of a BUAC, emotion norms arguably play a more important role in retaining commitment, stability and even growth than in an ESC such as NATO or the EU. Although it does not preclude material gain, membership in the group does not guarantee it either, and it is certainly not a way of ensuring commitment to the BUAC. The *glue* is rather an adherence to and articulation of the community's emotion norms. Similar to how an emotional community becomes an ESC, BUACs become relevant for regional security when those emotion norms acquire existential connotations for members and others. A white nationalist BUAC

provides an example whereby the moral judgements of the community can prescribe violence towards members of their perceived out-group. Alternatively, moral judgements can entail a humanitarian impulse, for example, when the emotion norms of activist BUACs recommend mobilisation to secure the free passage of refugees from war zones.

To demonstrate the relevance of BUACs for regional security, I briefly discuss their influence across two cases, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. As outlined, proximity remains an important variable in security analyses. However, that is not to say that an analytical lens that privileges proximity can explain every aspect of the two cases. Nuance is added by focusing on the security implications of BUACs' emotion norms and activities. For each case study, a BUAC will be identified, and while a diverse range of potential emotion norms that they mobilise around is conceivable, the discussion in each section will focus on just two: hatred and empathy. The rationale behind this selection is that both hold significant potential to influence actors into taking actions with security implications, given their respective association with hostility and moral concern for others.

Ukraine Solidarity BUAC

Although one could focus on many different forms of the BUAC that have emerged in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for the purpose of brief illustration, I focus on just one sub-cohort of it here, constituting foreign fighters who have joined Kyiv's armed forces. Shortly after the 2022 invasion, the Ukrainian government established the International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine, though thousands of foreign fighters were already in the country, the influx of which started with the 2014 annexation of Crimea. While accurate figures are difficult to establish, and there are incentives for exaggeration, Kyiv claims that its foreign legion numbers over 20,000 soldiers from 55 countries (Snider, 2024). Although this is considerably smaller than Ukraine's overall total of roughly 900,000 active troops, the Legion has played a crucial role, particularly as the military struggles to replenish battlefield losses.

Trying to understand the willingness of volunteers to risk their lives for another country's security is, to varying degrees, a struggle for theoretical frameworks that privilege proximity, though they would likely highlight that many of the Legion's volunteers come from the 'neighbourhood' and may fear that if Ukraine falls, their homeland will be next. Indeed, the country from which most volunteers are drawn is Poland, and many other fighters have come from post-Soviet states. However, when one considers that many other volunteers come from outside the immediate region, the argument becomes more difficult to sustain. Although most volunteers do come from Poland, the second and third biggest contributors are the US and Canada (Snider, 2024). Significant numbers have also come from outside the Euro-Atlantic sphere, with 70 volunteers from Japan alone signing up in the week following the 2022 invasion (Habtom, 2022).

What, then, can explain the willingness of volunteers to travel to Ukraine and fight? In contrast to many other examples in which troops join a foreign army, Ukraine's international volunteers are unique in that they are "individually motivated" to enlist rather than acting upon the instructions of their government or some other kind of organisation (Habtom, 2022, p. 82). A theoretical framework that privileges bottom-up agency over top-down authority can add nuance that may otherwise be elusive. As outlined in the preceding section, emotion norms play a crucial role in ensuring BUAC's members remain committed and the community remains stable. Therefore, focusing upon emotion norms—in this case, empathy and hatred—articulated by members of the Legion contributes to our understanding of why they volunteer.

Empathy is a very prominently articulated emotion, with volunteers typically voicing a desire to help ease Ukrainian suffering. Some recruits from the region theorised that their history predisposed them to feel their neighbour's pain, with one speculating, "Lithuanians—and Poles and Czechs—perhaps because we have a deeper understanding of who the Russians are and what kind of imperialistic thinking is behind them, we empathise more easily." However, voicing empathy with Ukrainians is arguably the most common sentiment expressed by volunteers, regardless of their origin. One Spanish volunteer explained his joining the Legion: "You have to take your heart in your hand and help people who need it" (Abend, 2022). "All my personal problems did not feel important anymore ... It felt wrong just to sit back and do nothing", said one American volunteer after seeing the suffering being endured by Ukrainians. "I had to go" (Guarino, 2022).

Contempt and demonisation of Russia and its proxies have also been a prominent driving force for recruits since before the 2022 invasion. For example, foreign fighters on both the Ukrainian and Russian/separatist sides of the conflict, following the annexation of Crimea, described each other as "fascists" and spoke of their "hatred" for the other side (Meger, 2019). That is a characterisation that continues into more recent years of the war, with fighters in the Legion continuing to equate Russian forces with "Nazis" (Somos, 2023). Many volunteers expressed horror at the atrocities they saw Russian soldiers and paramilitaries committing on social media and television against "otherwise defenceless civilians" (Arutyunova & Bocchese, 2023). Witnessing the "aggression, the murder of innocent people" fueled a sense of outrage and injustice that, for many, was a driving force in signing up (Abend, 2022). "I read a story that a woman was sexually assaulted in front of her six-year-old son by Russian soldiers," said one recruit, who signed up for the Legion four days later. Once in battle, he said that he "kept the evil the Russians were doing in my heart ... I tried not to become like them (the Russians) while we were fighting ... I am not a f***ing animal" (Somos, 2023).

One final note worth making, which matches with expectations outlined earlier, is the diversity of the Legion. In addition to being drawn from a wide variety of countries, volunteers represent a broad range of worldviews, with the Legion including recruits who identified as neo-Nazis, anti-fascists and defenders of Western democracy (Meger, 2019; Rubinsztein-Dunlop et al., 2018). Such diversity further indicates the role that shared emotion norms, such as hatred and empathy, play in maintaining the stability of a BUAC.

Palestine Solidarity BUAC

Unlike the Ukrainian equivalent, solidarity within the Palestinian BUAC has not resulted in large numbers of troops travelling to the region to fight, but it nonetheless carries significant security implications due to the activism and broadening of the community in recent years. Since the October 7th attacks by Hamas, which resulted in the deaths of 1,139 Israelis, and the subsequent assault on Gaza by Israel, which killed at least 46,000 Gazans at the time of writing, there have been fundamental shifts in Western public opinion, with sympathy for the plight of Palestinians increasing substantially (Moqbel, 2024). This has triggered policies in several Western countries that were previously politically infeasible, such as Ireland, Spain, Norway and Slovenia's diplomatic recognition of the state of Palestine and the United Kingdom's withdrawal of its objection to an International Criminal Court arrest warrant for Israeli leaders. Outside of the West, the Houthi regime in Yemen has launched attacks on ships they perceive as linked to Israel in the Red Sea, which they justified by reference to the affinity their people feel towards persecuted Palestinians. Although the security implications of the Houthi attacks on ships are obvious, this is not necessarily the case with the policy choices of the European states. Looking at the framing of those policies by European policymakers and Israeli lawmakers clarifies the picture, however, with the former describing it as the only viable pathway towards peace and the latter describing it as encouraging terrorism (O'Connor, 2024).

What explains the adoption of these policies, given that they were either previously considered politically unthinkable or not worth the risk? Again, adopting the lens of a BUAC can help provide some clarity while also highlighting security risks that can potentially occur as a byproduct of the community's growth. For clarity purposes, it is worth noting that the policies mentioned are being treated as governments making choices they know will find favour with their public due to the latter's transmission of their preferences via protest and other forms of activism. The politicians themselves are not necessarily members of the BUAC, though they may share many of the convictions of their populations. Ultimately, though, the personal convictions of the politicians are unimportant, as the policies they are pursuing have only become feasible because of the mobilisation of their people around their shared emotional reactions.

Starting again with empathy, although protests have taken place in many countries in defence of Israel's policies since October 7th, much larger and more numerous demonstrations have occurred around the world voicing empathy with "Palestinian suffering" (Al Jazeera, 2024). Decentralised, bottom-up citizen action is a feature of the community, reflected, for example, in Indian dock workers refusing to handle military cargo bound for Israel, occupations of British weapons factories supplying the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), or Google employees in America petitioning their employer to cut ties with IDF-linked initiatives (Hao, 2024). Some of the most common themes of these forms of activism are underwritten by the sentiment of empathising with Palestinians, referring to their treatment as "genocide," highlighting the death toll amongst women and children, and calling for a "free Palestine"

(Alsharif & Tarrant, 2024). The broad Palestinian solidarity movement includes several groups—such as Islamists, Jewish organisations, LGBTQ+ activists, farmers and environmentalists—that would not all typically share comparable worldviews, underlining the importance of the emotional underpinning, in this case, empathy with Palestinians, for the stability of the BUAC.

Another emotion norm observable in the Palestinian solidarity BUAC, though certainly not as widely shared as empathy, is hatred targeted at Israel and its perceived representatives, often in the form of antisemitism. This is arguably a more difficult-to-capture phenomenon in the current context, given the Netanyahu government's tendency to label rhetoric or policies with which they disagree—including the diplomatic recognition of Palestine—as antisemitic. However, hatred in more undeniable forms is featured in some corners of the BUAC. It is reflected, for example, in the chanting of slogans, such as “death to America; death to Israel; curse the Jews,” burning of the Israeli flag, and an “unprecedented surge in bigotry” towards Jewish communities, including hate crimes (a trend that has also been reflected in relation to Islamophobia), in many Western countries since the October 7th attacks (Associated Press, 2024; Yang, 2023). Although far from a defining feature of the BUAC, which contains many Jewish individuals and organisations, the emotion norm of hatred is an undeniable feature of the rhetoric and actions of a sub-cohort of its membership. Its presence indicates another security implication of the moral judgements that can characterise an emotional community. Although the greatest risk is to the victims of bigotry, there are also threats to wider society, as affective polarisation—characterised by citizens increasingly feeling identity-based antipathy towards one another—fosters increased tolerance for extremist parties and support for political violence (Iyengar et al., 2012).

Conclusion

The preceding is intended only as a conversation starter. It hints at the insights regionalism studies can derive from decreasing its emphasis on geographic proximity and recognising the emergence of new kinds of communities clustered around transnational emotional linkages between individuals. With the conversation started, its continuation entails several different points of focus hinted at in the preceding pages.

For example, future research could interrogate the suitability of how we theorise a region when thinking about different kinds of communities and their roles in international relations. Although this process has already begun, perhaps regionalism theorists need to further loosen the concept of ‘region’ from its territorial connotations. This could open the door for new kinds of meta-regions, such as BUACs, with significant implications for the traditional foci of regionalism studies, including international cooperation, security and development.

Since only two kinds of emotion norms, empathy and hatred, were covered in this essay, future studies could also investigate how BUACs behave under the influence

of different kinds of emotional guidelines and related moral judgments. Relatedly, it would be potentially fruitful to investigate the processes through which emotion norms change. Acquiring a better understanding of such processes would be of particular societal benefit for contexts in which empathy for one group risks bleeding over into hatred for another.

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Essay 48: Reading and Writing Global Regionalism from Africa



Jens Herpolsheimer

Introduction

Over the last couple of years, the visibility and recognition of the importance of *Africa* in global politics has been increasing significantly, both as a relevant space, but also as a range of actors centrally including states as well as African regional organisations (ROs)/regionalisms (e.g., recent Africa tour of the Russian foreign minister Lavrov, AU acceptance into G20). This observation seems to stand in stark contrast to the persistent criticism advanced against African ROs in many policy publications and much of the academic literature. In this essay, I argue that this tension is the result of serious limits in our knowledge and an inaccurate/imprecise image of African ROs/regionalism when it comes to the *inner life* of African ROs (Döring et al., 2021), and ROs in the Global South more generally, but also about their entanglements and active engagement with other ROs (inter-organisational relations), regionalisms (inter-regionalism), international actors, and global politics in general. What is missing, I argue, is much more in-depth empirical research and detailed descriptions as integral elements of new ways of making sense—understanding and theorising—of the *African* dimension of *global regionalism*, and work towards a more truly *global* IR that is able to overcome unhelpful dichotomies (e.g., Western/non-Western, Global North/Global South). In this way, the essay aims to connect to earlier calls to that effect (although not specifically focusing on regionalisms, e.g., Mbembe, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al., 2022), as well as to burgeoning scholarship on regionalisms working in that direction (e.g., Tieku, 2017; Witt, 2020).

After roughly a decade of empirical research on regional organisations (ROs) in Africa, as key elements of African regionalism, I can testify to both serious shortcomings and certain dysfunctional elements of African ROs, as they have been widely observed by scholars and practitioners alike. However, at the same time, I can also

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attest to incredible personal efforts of a large number of extremely committed individuals who, at great sacrifice to their personal lives, have achieved remarkable things, against all odds—faced with extreme challenges both in number and intensity (e.g., poverty, climate change, coups d'état), as well as extremely limited resources, lack of political commitment, socio-economic and political challenges of member states, to mention but a few. What I have taken away from my long-term engagement during repeated research visits to headquarters of African ROs, specifically the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU), is that general assessments of these organisations as we often find them in media reports or existing scholarship, while not entirely wrong, tend to miss important aspects/dimensions of their *nature* and work.

In this think piece, I draw on ongoing debates in international studies/IR and global studies more generally that so far have remained largely (although not entirely) disconnected from scholarship on African ROs/regionalism, to make several suggestions on how to change the state of affairs described so far. In particular, I am suggesting a revaluation of detailed descriptive research, as part and parcel of a different way of theorising, including a particular sensitivity to practices (as co-constitutive elements of social realities) and space (as ongoing, open-ended, social construction, see Herpolsheimer, 2021, pp. 38–39, 43–45).

In this essay, I use *reading* to refer to both the ways in which we observe (including the actual reading of documents) and particular observations (i.e., readings). *Writing*, on the other hand, is used to highlight the sense-making and theorising dimensions of our engagement with African ROs and global regionalism, including the contribution of scholars to *making* these phenomena. Applying this kind of methodology/theorising will allow us to *read* and *write* global regionalism *better* from Africa, that is, more adequately, more relevantly and creatively: (i) African ROs/regionalisms are a testament to the inherent multidimensionality of regionalism. They are dominated by heads of state and often captured by the interests of more or less autocratic regimes. However, they are also critical frontiers in negotiating and implementing (liberal) norms, in particular with respect to democracy and good governance (e.g., constitutional order and rule of law)—they are not one but many, agencies coming together from different interrelated sites, actors and practices. Related to this observation, and (ii) African ROs/regionalisms are parts of fields and networks of organisations, linked to different communities of practice. In this way, they constitute essential elements of 'global regionalism' that cannot be separated from others. The remainder of this essay explains these points in more detail.

Reading: What Do We Observe, How, and What Do We See?

At first sight, the most recent series of coups d'état in West Africa, as well as the withdrawal of the three Sahelian member states of ECOWAS (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger), seem to suggest an inability by African ROs to effectively respond to

critical issues of governance, peace and security in West Africa. This raises questions about their relevance and legitimacy, as well as the relevance of regionalism more generally. At the very least, we can observe regionalism in crisis, and the threat of (further) fragmentation of regional spaces undermining gains of the last decades (what Kwame Nkrumah some 60 years ago referred to as balkanisation, Nkrumah, 2007 [1963], p. 173). However, upon closer inspection, this is not all that we can learn from *reading* global regionalism from Africa. For example, we can observe the repositioning of ROs. Internally, intense debates and contestation of what these organisations should be about and how they should respond to different challenges, reflecting different actors, interests and, essentially, complex *politics* that are still too often left out of the picture when research focuses too much on seemingly *technical* problems. Differences among the Sahelian member states of ECOWAS (now the Alliance of Sahelian States, AES) and other members have previously been visible, although they have been expressed in other terms (see, Baldaro & López Lucía, 2022), including the creation of a parallel organisation that now has also become obsolete (i.e., the G5 Sahel). Moreover, internal contestation also continues among the remaining members, which has been visible in ECOWAS' initial responses to the coup in Niger and in the more recent shift of position, lifting sanctions on Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, following their declared withdrawal from ECOWAS (Herpolsheimer, 2024a).

Moreover, we can observe that, although contested and despite their shortcomings, African ROs/regionalisms have been and continue to be critical sites for engagement among various (state and non-state) actors from the region, as well as beyond it. Detailed attention to everyday practice also shows that they are intimately connected to other ROs/regionalisms, international actors, and trans-regional communities of practice (Bueger et al., 2024), with the European Union (EU) continuing to be the most important partner by far. Finally, while at least one existing RO is being challenged (i.e., ECOWAS), the idea, need and actual political practice of regionalism seems to be as strong as ever, as visible in the creation of the AES as a new RO, but also (at least for the time being) in the continued membership of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in both the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) and, of course, the African Union (AU). It is precisely these entanglements that make (African) ROs/regionalism both relevant and interesting to study, and we need to pay much closer attention to their various sites, actors and practices to understand and ultimately explain better who exactly is doing what, how and why to learn more about global regionalism and global ordering.

What becomes clear from these short considerations is that what and how we observe is not simply given or self-evident and may fundamentally change what we are able to see. If we study African ROs from *afar*, based on formal agreements and official documents only, and drawing on Western/Euro-centric ideals, norms and theories (as is still common in much of IR), the emerging picture and assessment is very different from the picture that emerges if we personally engage with the actual “people who run African affairs” (Tieku et al., 2020). Although there is certainly value to both, in the following, I argue that what we need more of is ambitious, interpretive comparative on-site research that produces detailed descriptions/theories. In this way,

it would be possible to find some *middle ground* between, on the one hand, a complete lack of theorisation and cumulation (i.e., interesting empirical stories about a specific single case, ignoring other scholarship and without establishing connections beyond that case) and, on the other, overly theoretic studies that lack detailed empirics, or do not fit them, and which are often too narrow in focus, often providing very limited insights into actual modes of operation. I think that especially research on African ROs/regionalism needs to be updated and connected more closely to innovative theoretical approaches in international studies/IR more generally (e.g., assemblage thinking, practice turn, spatial approaches, see Herpolsheimer, 2021, pp. 35–48).

To that end, I suggest a very broad exercise that is at the same time empirically driven and theory-oriented. For this, it is necessary to apply a broad and much more open understanding of agency than is commonly the case—every individual acts and therefore has agency that potentially affects ROs/regionalisms. Even actors perceived as *weak* may have their more or less subtle ways of influencing organisational processes and politics, directly or indirectly. If we fail to pay attention to these different ways of exercising agency and influencing global politics, we tend to overlook or discard the agency of actors at African ROs (or other ROs from the Global South) as irrelevant (i.e., not powerful or influential enough). Moreover, we need to pay attention to actual practice (as opposed to official statements only) and specific practices (who is doing what, how), directly linked to sense-making by individuals, groups and organisations (why do they do what they do, in a particular way). This requires both a historical and a spatial sensitivity.

With respect to concrete research practice, I suggest a combination of two sets of methods in particular, none of which is new, but whose potential still remains under-explored when it comes to studying African ROs/regionalisms, as well as ‘reading’ global regionalism from Africa and other spaces outside the Global North. The first one is to gain access to the actual people who *make up* and perform African ROs, in order to learn more about their lives and their work (i.e., their social worlds), where possible, through participant observation and/or *hanging out* (Nair, 2021), but most importantly qualitative relational interviewing with practitioners (Fujii, 2018; on practice research specifically, see Pouliot, 2016, Annex). The second set of methods refers to *new* ways of actually *reading* different kinds of documents produced by African ROs. While a mainstay of much of mainstream research on ROs, used as a key source of seemingly objective/face-value information, they are often approached in an under-complex and (sometimes erroneously) straightforward manner. Here, it is crucial to recognise them as key practices in and of themselves, intimately related to a range of other practices beyond the text, which we can study by reading them differently (Bueger, 2014; see also Cornut & Zamaróczy, 2021). Considering the massive output of documents by African ROs, which are increasingly becoming available online, it is time to take these *paper tigers* seriously (Warnck, 2024) and make the most out of these materials.

Writing: How Do We Make Sense and Theorise?

From the above, it is clear that regions, ROs and regionalisms are playing and very likely will continue to play crucial roles in world politics, even if the ways in which they do may be difficult to discern from the surface, and may change in subtle ways (i.e., the *changing same*, Allen, 2016), openly or even dramatically (e.g., withdrawals from ECOWAS). Based on these different readings/ways of reading—drawing on in-depth empirical research and especially on-site research—it becomes possible and, in fact, necessary to also (re)write global regionalism *from* Africa. This brings me to the question of how we report and write about what we see/read, and what kind of theorising we need to make sense of them in ways that make comparative regionalism scholarship relevant to practitioners and academic debates alike, and contribute to a more global IR and help to overcome unhelpful dichotomies.

Obviously, the *reading* part is not a passive or objective endeavour either—what we choose to pay attention to, how we observe, and what it is that we see is influenced by a wide range of individual and social/systemic factors. However, it is the *writing* part where we as scholars most actively contribute to *making* global regionalism. Therefore, continuously reflecting on our own practices, including how we report and theorise, is essential.

To me, it seems that much of the decidedly theoretical scholarship on ROs and regionalism presents itself as or at least aspires to be completely *objective* and tends to devalue detailed empirical and descriptive work (i.e., *mere description*, Gerring, 2012). As mentioned in the previous section, this often results in quantitative correlational analyses (largely relying on official documents and formal agreements) that necessarily need to make tough choices to seriously reduce complexity and operationalise variables. This kind of research may produce interesting observations, but it captures only a rather narrow part of much more complex social realities, and it does not explain *how* things are actually related by specific actors and how these make sense of these relations. On the other hand, scholars with theoretical ambition who work qualitatively, in their writing, tend to obscure underlying practices (e.g., difficult choices, how to reconcile data inconsistencies, and positionality). The reasons may include avoiding criticism, appearing as subjective, or *merely descriptive*. However, in both cases, subjective elements cannot be entirely muted, as they are inherent to the research of social worlds. Therefore, we should embrace them, make them explicit and be as transparent as possible. Global regionalism is always also personal and subjective, and our writing needs to reflect this.

Against this backdrop, I argue for the need for different ways of theorising global regionalism, closely linking theory and practice. Rather than following standardised general rules, as a practice, theorising “becomes a generative activity of revealing, making perceptible, and of nurturing and caring for particular phenomena, collectives or objects” (Bueger, 2022, p. 57). Ultimately, it is about establishing relatively stable (i.e., temporarily stabilised) relations that last and that can travel from one context to others and depend on a committed collective that actively nurtures and maintains them (Bueger, 2022, p. 58). Nora Fisher-Onar and Emilian Kavalski define

theorising as “itinerant translation,” and the theorist’s role as creative agent, “offering windows onto other empirical dynamics,” providing “dynamic openings,” and facilitating “interaction between different bodies and cultures of knowledge, translating and arranging the subject material” (Fisher-Onar & Kavalski, 2023, p. 5). For this, we also need to re-evaluate detailed descriptions (e.g., Gerring, 2012; Holmes et al., 2024), which are intrinsically linked to theorising and allow us to write global regionalism *from* different spaces that simultaneously have their particularities and are closely entangled with each other, and to engage in interpretive comparison (Boswell et al., 2019). Such detailed descriptions need to identify, historicise and theorise the relevant sites, actors and practices of particular ROs, regionalisms, and their entanglements in global regionalism (e.g., how they are influenced or influence, actor mobility, multiple identities, learning, contestation). These points are also at the heart of decolonial methodologies (e.g., Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al., 2022).

What Do We Learn By Writing Global Regionalism from Africa?

If we embrace a certain degree of subjectivity, incompleteness and detailed empirical work and description as the basis for theorising that is simultaneously sensitive to specificity and entanglements, the (hi)story of African ROs/regionalism needs to be told/written very differently, current events appear in a different light, and future possibilities can be debated in different terms—focusing less on *successes* and *failures*, and more on processes, inter-relations, and multidimensionality (multi-scalar, multi-actors, multi-issue, etc.).

From such a perspective, it is possible to recognise the specific historical trajectories that have led to the creation of different formal regionalisms/ROs in Africa (and elsewhere). Although they have emerged from different initial experiences, motivations, and actor constellations (Engel & Herpolsheimer, 2024), they are largely built around agreements among autocratic/authoritarian regimes. For example, in ECOWAS and the AU, these have primarily aimed to fend off external interference and protect their regimes, despite many African ROs primarily referring to economic integration (which has advanced to very different degrees, see AU, 2022). However, from there, the two organisations have achieved remarkable things during the 1990s and early 2000s, developing pathbreaking, far-reaching intervention mechanisms and putting sovereignty/non-interference in internal affairs into question (even if in practice often walking a fine line, rarely going against incumbents). These achievements, seemingly against all odds, have been the result of long-term processes of trust-building, the negotiation and subsequent institutionalisation of innovative norms and practices. Since the 2010s, we have witnessed a new period of intensifying contestation, along with extreme challenges (e.g., climate change, migration, violent extremism), culminating in the most recent resurgence of coups d’état and spatial/organisational contestation and re-ordering. However, moments of crisis may also

contain new opportunities, for example, a chance for ECOWAS to reimagine itself as an organisation (e.g., see Obadare, 2024) and gather new momentum for (old) projects (e.g., common currency, see Brouck, 2024).

Conclusion

What becomes discernible in this very short and admittedly crude account, is that ROs/regionalisms in Africa (and elsewhere) are not just one but always multiples, constituted by different, changing, counter-weighting forces, which are always present/co-existing, but whose balance may change, as different constellations of actors, interests, agendas, etc. take the lead or gain the upper hand. This is always a *work in progress*, only temporary and requires constant efforts to stabilise or destabilise these constellations. Some changes are rather subtle and may be difficult to see above the *surface*/from the outside. Others are more dramatic. The (historical) grouping of the Sahel states within ECOWAS is an example of the former, whereas the declared withdrawal of the Sahel Alliance states from the organisation exemplifies the latter. Our writing and theorising need to reflect these historical and contemporary processes, as well as inter-relations between different sites, actors, and practices, both within and across regions.

Due to their assembled character—agency emerging from multiple sites, actors, and practices within and beyond the organisation's proper, African ROs/regionalisms form part of organisational fields and networks, and thus have been and continue to be crucial elements of global regionalism and global politics more generally. Not only have African ROs forged very close relations with a range of external actors since the very beginning, but many have also increasingly institutionalised and expanded their external relations and developed what can be described as *globalisation projects* (Herpolsheimer et al., 2025, forthcoming). Inter-regional and inter-organisational relations between African ROs and the European Union (EU) are an obvious example of the interconnectedness of regionalisms in Africa and elsewhere, demonstrating the continued relevance of Africa in global regionalism. Increasingly describing the wide range of actors and practices, across different interrelated sites, involved in making, maintaining, and contesting these relations, allows us to look beyond formal declarations, agreements and occasional high-level events (Herpolsheimer, 2024b). Doing so, it is possible to observe that, despite persistent tensions between African ROs and the EU and strong anti-Western sentiments currently expressed in some African states, on the level of everyday practice, these organisations continue to engage very closely across a vast range of policy fields. Here, the EU remains a key strategic partner. Based on these observations, we can theorise African ROs/regionalisms as platforms, connectors/intersections (or portals, Engel, 2017), as intermediaries or frontiers between *external* (e.g., liberal Western) and African interests and world views, where communities of practice work and interact.

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Essay 49: Re-Evaluation of Contemporary Approaches to Regionalism: In Quest of a Non-western Research Agenda



Denis A. Degterev, Mirmehdi M. Aghazada, and Mirzet S. Ramich

Introduction

In recent decades, the *Collective West*¹ has been the driving force behind the development of regionalism, both in theory and in practice. In practical terms, this is primarily constituted by a network of economic partnership agreements, association agreements, *enhanced partnerships*, including the EU-ACP,² which *cements* neo-colonial centre-periphery relations (Bokeriya et al., 2022), a phenomenon that is reinforced by other elements of the *structural power* of the *Collective West*, including the WTO (trade), the Bretton Woods institutions (finance), the OECD (economics), and NATO (security) (Strange, 1988).

Susan Strange identifies four primary structural powers, plus four secondary ones. However, she does not include Western regionalism as another global structural power of the *Collective West*. Furthermore, structural power via regionalism is confined to Europe and not the USA, within the framework of a peculiar distribution of responsibilities between them. The United States is responsible for security in the framework of NATO. The Trade and Investment Framework Agreements (TIFAs) signed by the

¹ Collective West—A geopolitical construct demonstrating the unity of the political, economic, and social systems and the foreign policy approaches of the states of the Euro-Atlantic region. The concept unites the US and its allies: the member states of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (except Türkiye), as well as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.

² Negotiations and agreements. Trade and Economic Security. European Commission. https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/negotiations-and-agreements_en.

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US are of a framework nature and usually contain only 3–4 pages of text,³ unlike the EU Partnership Agreements, which include hundreds of pages of commitments, the fulfilment of which is the manifestation of the EU's *normative power* as a global actor.

In theoretical terms, there are five forms of integration (free trade area, customs union, common market, economic and monetary union, and political union) that each regional integration grouping *should* have passed through. These forms were proposed by Béla Alexander Balassa, an American economist and World Bank consultant of Hungarian origin, in 1961 (Balassa, 1961), when the European Economic Community was just taking its first steps. Thus, the theory of stages initially had a highly normative (even visionary) character, but it was supplemented by a functional and neo-functional approach during the *unipolar moment* and the discursive hegemony period, acquiring a positivist and even mandatory character for all *civilised* integration groupings.

Belated Deconstruction of EU-Centrism

A genuine theory of Non-Western regionalism does not quite fit the EU-centric approach, which was clearly identified by Amitav Acharya almost 10 years ago (Acharya, 2016, pp. 116–119). In essence, non-Western regionalism is anti-hegemonic in nature, aimed at mitigating the negative consequences of Western hegemonism in trade, economic, and security spheres. In this context, the developmental dimension of regionalism (Nesadurai, 2022) and the strengthening of sovereignty, which was weakened by the Structural Adjustment Programs of the 1980s–1990s (Degterev, 2024a), are of particular importance. Against the backdrop of the crisis of liberal peacekeeping (Adu et al., 2023) and the multilateral approach, non-Western countries can rely primarily on themselves for security or rely on the goodwill of American hegemony, offering *security for natural resources* deals in 2025, as the crisis in DR Congo clearly demonstrates.

At the same time, any non-Western (Eurasian, African, Latin American, etc.) regionalism founded on a Eurocentric approach is peripheral to the EU, contributing to the structuring of inequitable, asymmetric relations that are characteristic of the EU's role as the primary agent of neocolonial trade practices within the *Collective West*, destroying the natural process of regional integration (Amuhaya & Degterev, 2022, pp. 125–177).

However, *beyond Eurocentrism* in the context of established global academic hierarchies, theorising non-Western regionalism has historically been underdeveloped. This was partly due to objective reasons, such as the long-term historical development of the education and science system, which led to the emergence of academic schools. On the other hand, the export of knowledge and, in this case, a particular model of

³ Trade & Investment Framework Agreements. Office of the U.S. Trade Representative. <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/trade-investment-framework-agreements>.

development, contributed to the strengthening of the neoliberal world order, which seeks to establish universal values and models of political and economic governance.

At best, it has been subjected to neglect (*denial* as the first stage according to the Kübler-Ross model), or ignored (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2015), or even outright ostracised, being called, for example, *authoritarian* (Obydenkova & Libman, 2019; Russo & Stoddard, 2018). Any regionalism dominated by a regional power is immediately declared hegemonic (Acharya, 2016, p. 111), although it is inconceivable that a small non-self-sufficient non-Western country could openly challenge the hegemony of the entire *Collective West*; this can only be done by relying on regional *hegemons* (Krapohl, 2017). In addition, small states, under the protection of great powers or alliances, can increase tensions by provoking other great powers into conflict. The Baltic states and their relations with Russia are cited as an example (Banka, 2025). In the EU, power is indeed quite dispersed between countries, but this does not mean that European regionalism is not hegemonic in nature; rather, it is *meta-hegemonic*. Moreover, when Ursula von der Leyen assumed the presidency of the European Commission in 2019 and took the course for a *geopolitical commission*,⁴ it became hegemonic in the literal sense.

The next stage of adoption, according to the Kübler-Ross model (bargaining), is coming, which is especially noticeable in business analytics. This is attributable to the fact that business is the primary sector in which to encounter the emerging reality (De Lombaerde et al., 2022). The discourse of Global Regional Theories is gradually spreading (Iroulo & Lenz, 2022), similar to the Global IR launched by Acharya.

There is a growing body of critical literature on the Eurocentric model of non-Western regionalism written by representatives of the Global South. Thus, Ernest Aniche, the developer of the post-neofunctional theory of African integration (Aniche, 2024a), rightly notes that African regionalism faces fundamentally different tasks than its EU-centric version. One of the crucial tasks in the first phase of the development of African regionalism is to ensure regional security (Aniche, 2024b). Odijie (2023) notes the inadequacy of regional industrial policies when the Regional Economic Community acts as a self-replicating mechanism for the destruction of national industry. A wake-up call for the existing system of peripheral non-Western regionalism was the withdrawal of three Sahel Alliance countries from ECOWAS, as the organisation simply did not know how to react: first threatening to send troops to the Sahel, and then asking the *rebellious countries* not to withdraw from the organisation (Adu & Mezyaev, 2024). Thus, genuine non-Western regionalism is still making its way in a unilateral format (Loshkariov, 2024).

However, the question arises as to why these stages of the adoption of the non-Western regionalism concept have taken so long. Under the structural conditions of the *unipolar moment*, some non-Western countries found themselves with no viable alternatives, despite the existence of ambitious regional initiatives in Asia, Africa, and Latin America that emerged in the early stages of independence (Iroulo & Lenz,

⁴ Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme. European Commission, 27.11.2019. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/speech_19_6408.

2022, pp. 37–38). Moreover, to a certain extent, the Eurocentric approach met at least some of the expectations of non-Western countries in terms of receiving loans, credits, and financial support from the EU.

In this context, it is worth noting the theoretical dispute about the absolute and relative benefits of states from international cooperation (Powell, 1991), which took place just before the advent of the era of the so-called *new regionalism* (a term that is already in need of further refinement). More than 30 years later, after the dissolution of the Socialist system, it is obvious that the *Collective West* has gained relative benefits and structurally has only consolidated its position in the world-system, while non-Western countries have gained rather absolute benefits (with the exception of Africa, where the absolute number of poor has continued to increase all these years).

Prior to 2022, the Russian Federation (and indeed the USSR since the 1970s), as well as other non-Western powers, gave serious consideration to the prospects of integration into the Euro-Atlantic community (Kurylev et al., 2022), resulting in the predominance of EU-centric approaches in both practice and post-Soviet theoretical discourse. In the cognitive space of other non-Western countries, such as post-Islamic Revolution Iran, where there was initially a critical attitude towards Western integration groups and their proxies from other regions, there were fundamentally different approaches to regionalism (Abdollah, 2017; Barzegar, 2010).

Back to the Future: Regionalism Before/After European Hegemony

In order to make further predictions about the dynamics of regionalism, it is necessary to choose the right time horizon. The impending shifts are macro-historical in nature as the 500-year period of Western hegemony is approaching its end, and therefore, an appropriate macro-historical perspective is required. For example, approximately a thousand years ago, China, India, and Egypt overtook Western Europe in terms of per capita income by 1.5–2 times. However, by 1800, Europe had surpassed them by 1.5 times, and by the mid-twentieth century, the disparity had widened to 4–5 times (Melyancev, 1996).

Europe has occupied the role of the global centre of regionalism for a number of reasons, which Wallerstein (2011) describes in detail. He starts his countdown of differentiation from the *long sixteenth century*. The slave trade and the plundering of colonies, as well as neo-colonial practices, played an instrumental role in the rise of the states on the European continent. The current consequence of this historical process is the prospect of large-scale reparations for that period, in various forms (Howard-Hassmann, 2008), not being ruled out in the future as part of the ever-growing reparations movement (in the African Union, the official theme of the year 2025 is *Justice for Africans and People of African Descent Through Reparations*).

After the start of the Ukrainian crisis in 2022, the global actorness of the European Union will gradually decrease in a macro-historical perspective. While it will retain

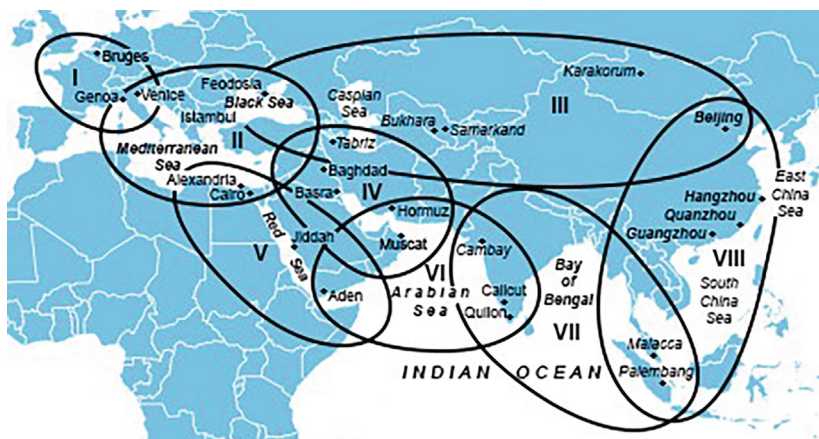


Fig. 1 Modern projection of the world-system according to J. Abu-Lughod. *Source* Designed by authors

its status as a single integration bloc, its capacity to project influence over vast distances will progressively diminish. In this context, it is noteworthy, for example, that Algeria, which has become one of the largest gas suppliers to the EU instead of Russia, in January 2025 initiated a revision of the partnership agreement with the EU, expecting to obtain more favourable conditions for itself.⁵ The attractiveness of the EU's interaction with the EU is gradually declining, and so is its bargaining power in interaction with third countries.

Against this background, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), based on ASEAN+5 Asian countries, including China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, is becoming increasingly important. It is here that the most advanced regional standards of cooperation in such areas as Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), AI, and others may be formed in the future.

In the macro-historic context, the study of the American macro-sociologist Abu-Lughod is of particular interest. She examines the system of empires and the order of interaction between them before Europe *pulled* individual actors into its world-system (Abu-Lughod, 1991). She observes that the world order that emerged at that time was truly polycentric, in the Eurasian rather than the Eurocentric sense, with its own rules of interaction (see Fig. 1).

Modern regionalism is hierarchical in nature, led by the centre and represented by the European Union, while the task of peripheral regional integration groupings is to suppress the influence of the regional powers. This provides quite comfortable conditions for small countries, but in some cases, it provokes them to irresponsible behaviour. After the dissolution of the USSR in the 1990s, it seemed that Francis Fukuyama's *end of history* had come, and the debate was about "whether

⁵ Algeria to review association agreement with the European Union. *Atalayar*. 28.01.2025. <https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/politics/algeria-to-review-association-agreement-with-the-european-union/20250128090000210361.html>.

regionalisation was a stumbling-block or stepping-stone towards globalisation and improved multilateralism” (Söderbaum, 2003, p. 5), i.e. about the final dissolution into a Eurocentric regional order. This order is gradually being replaced by the great powers order (Dugin, 2025), backed by the rise of China, and the role of alternative non-Western regional blocs and institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, EAEU, ASEAN, and the Organisation of Turkic States is increasing.

An important role in this is played by BRICS, within the framework of which the rules of interaction between the emerging poles of the multipolar world are being formed, with the most self-sufficient being the civilisational poles that have de facto already formed around the Chinese, Russian, and Indian civilisations, as A. Dugin points out. Self-sufficiency is ensured by reliance on their own forces and minimal support from the neighbouring poles. In any case, the level of interaction in such a polycentric system is somewhat lower than in the previous one, but global power is more equally distributed. In a number of regions, such as Africa, self-sufficiency could be ensured at the level of its regions or the continent as a whole (Degterev, 2024b).

Countries of the Collective West are trying to *fix* the institutions of global governance, belatedly abandoning hegemonic approaches to reduce the relative attractiveness of alternative, non-Western institutions, but objective macro-historical processes cannot be stopped.

From Post-Soviet to Eurasian Regionalism: A Complex Transformation

The concept of post-Soviet regionalism emphasises the historical commonalities of the countries of the region and the already established institutionalism, including in the political (CIS), economic (EAEU), and military (CSTO) spheres. On the other hand, post-Soviet regionalism is distinguished by Russian scholars by its intermediate nature (*civilised divorce*, or in fact *controlled disintegration* of a once unified state) and limited subjectivity within the existing world-system (Aghazada et al., 2023, p. 343).

Eurasian regionalism, so far institutionalised only in the EAEU format (Lagutina, 2019), is still largely Eurocentric in nature. However, in the future, it could evolve into a pivotal centre for non-Western regionalism. This requires a *reset* of its ideological foundations on the basis of non-Western values, as well as an *inventory* of the already existing agreements of post-Soviet countries with Western powers, namely the EU and the USA. It is evident that certain accords and arrangements directly contradict the *spirit and letter* of Eurasian integration, thereby representing a *negative centrifugal legacy* of post-Soviet regionalism. This, in turn, serves to intensify the existing rivalry between Eurasian and Euro-Atlantic regionalisms, and in certain instances (for example, the Ukrainian crisis), it can lead to a transformation of this rivalry into a power struggle, which countries would like to avoid in the future.

Furthermore, the terms *Eurasia* and *Eurasian* are highly ambiguous and open to interpretation. Thus, according to Heller, “Eurasia usually refers to the fifteen internationally recognised independent states that emerged from the breakup of the Soviet Union” (Heller, 2022, p. 484). Molchanov uses the term *postcommunist Eurasia* (former Soviet space plus China) and believes that “regionalism in Eurasia emerged in the early 1990s in the form of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), still centred on Russia as an internationally recognised legal successor to the Soviet Union” (Molchanov, 2015, pp. 1–2). In turn, Libman and Obydenkova believe that “the notion of the “post-Soviet” regional integration is well established in the literature and only recently gave way to the concept of “Eurasian” regionalism” (Libman & Obydenkova, 2017, p. 3). At the same time, experts also speak of Eurasia as an ideological concept, emphasising the differences between Russia and its neighbours and the European world, as well as about *pragmatic Eurasianism*, when Asia and Europe are considered together (Vinokurov & Libman, 2012, pp. 16–24).

The approach of Dugin, who considers regionalism in the post-Soviet space within the framework of the Eurasian civilisation, deserves special attention. In his opinion, Russia is a “body” in this civilisation, “but without arms, legs and a head,” and for full integration under the umbrella of Eurasian civilisation, it is necessary to restore historical borders (Dugin, 2022, p. 147). It is not about expansion or a new kind of imperialism, but “about creating a brotherhood of peoples, cultures, religions in a single common context” (Dugin, 2022, p. 148).

Since 2014, but especially after 2022, the prospects of a *new iron curtain* have loomed over Eurasia, which was very clearly shown by the French geopolitician Pierre-Emmanuel Thomann (see Fig. 2).

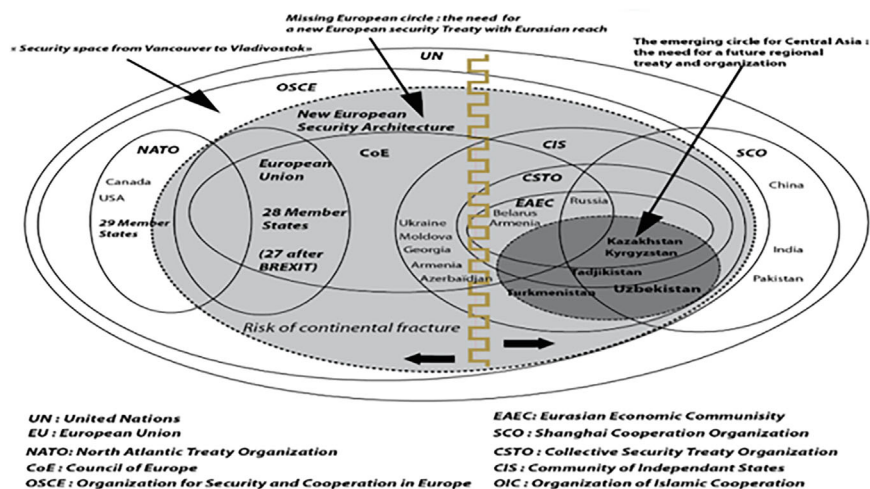


Fig. 2 Competing regionalisms in Eurasia. *Source* Authors’ elaboration based on Aghazada et al., (2023, p. 345)

The geopolitical scheme proposed by Pierre-Emmanuel Thomann itself seems to be overly Eurocentric—the left side of the Eurasian space occupies the main part of the *continental oval* (which clearly does not correspond to the cartographic projection), besides, Georgia and Azerbaijan look detached from the Russian pole on it, which can be questioned. Nevertheless, even this projection began to cause concerns in the US about too close an alliance of the two largest Eurasian powers—Russia and China. By planning to normalise relations with Russia in 2025, President Trump does not forget about the American Grand Strategy: “preserving the political division of industrial Eurasia remains a U.S. interest” (Posen & Ross, 1996, p. 15).

In addition, both the US and the EU are intensifying their relations with Central Asian countries (the darkest oval in Fig. 2), which represent a soft underbelly for both Russia and China. In recent years, the dynamics of Russia’s relations with its CIS neighbours (especially with Armenia and Moldova) have worsened, compared to, for example, those with Iran, the countries of the Alliance of Sahel States, Myanmar, or the Central African Republic. It is possible that Russia and the EAEU, as a global region, will be projected into these Global South countries, expanding into the operational space rather than being confined within the borders of the former USSR.

Overall, there has been a gradual increase in China’s influence in the region, including in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, which, however, differs from traditional regionalism (De Lombaerde et al., 2022). The Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) have become the institutionalised embodiment of China’s vision of regionalism beyond the region (Tseng & Lim, 2019). However, according to a number of authors, it is a post-Western regionalism based on the theoretical framework of the concept of China-centrism, *Tianxia* (Raoul & Chih-yu, 2011, p. 95). Historically, China never had colonies. The format of interaction that developed between China and its neighbouring countries was based on *tribute trade*, which did not imply direct or indirect control over foreign territories. In this context, it is useful to take a closer look at the dynamics of Asian regionalism in general. Zhao Tingyan, the author of the *Tianxia* theory, suggests that the *Tianxia* system is as open a system as possible, in which there is no place for antagonism, as it implies peaceful coexistence with countries that do not desire to join it (Zhao, 2019, pp. 14–15).

Asian Regionalism: Towards Self-Sufficient Macro-Regions

The global framework of the Cold War, fears of China’s growing influence and the abstraction of *alignment* with great powers have created the conditions for the institutionalisation of *soft* regionalism in Asia, embodied in ASEAN. This approach requires the cultivation of certain habits, notably a low-key and informal style of diplomacy, consensus-building, and non-confrontational bargaining. This is where ASEAN differs from the more formal and often *intrusive* institutions of European cooperation (Acharya & Johnston, 2001). ASEAN does not seek to formalise

decision-making but maintains a flexible model where there is an opportunity to avoid open disagreement.

Such a set of the above factors made it possible to propose an approach that differed from the neoliberal institutional approaches that had emerged in the European region. The ASEAN countries made the choice in favour of regional partners with more developed economies, rather than globalist financial institutions that were more dependent on the policies of the US and the *Collective West* countries.

While the Asian approach failed to create a unified system of regional security, it did allow for a focus on economic development in inclusive dialogue formats that brought together countries with different political structures, orientations, and economic models. The only structure that brought the countries of the region together to address security issues was the ASEAN Regional Forum, which combined formal dialogue at the ministerial level with leading think tanks of the participating countries, allowing for a preliminary discussion of approaches and positions to reduce contradictions at high-level negotiations (Heller, 2005, pp. 128–131).

In general, Eurasia has developed a large number of different formats of cooperation, both in the security and economic spheres. An important factor in the development of these formats is the parallel participation of some countries in different formats. While in the first case there is a clear regional clustering, with the European cluster being the most developed (Fig. 3), in the case of economic formats the structure is characterised by closer interaction between actors, and in addition to the developed European cluster, there is an Asian cluster, which has been gaining momentum in recent years and is represented by several formats (Fig. 4). On the one hand, parallel membership allows countries to manoeuvre between different formats. On the other hand, in this case, countries will not be fully loyal to one of the regional agreements, and development may not be as rapid (Chacha, 2014).

In addition to Russia-centric and China-centric regionalisms, another format of regionalism emerged in 2021—Turkic-centric (or Turkic/Türkiye-centric) regionalism. The transformation of the Turkic Council into the Organisation of Turkic States in 2021, on the one hand, laid the foundation for institutionalism in the political sphere among Turkic states, and on the other hand, created new geopolitical realities in Central Eurasia. Common ethnic roots, religion, language, and culture allow for the rapid development of integration processes between Turkic states. In particular, Türkiye's promotion of a common Turkic ideology by increasing its military-political presence and trade and economic ties in the region became the reason for the emergence of this organisation.

The first issue on the agenda of regional organisations in Asia is economic cooperation that benefits all participants. Asian actors oppose foreign interference and seek to ensure that regional problems are solved by regional actors. Approaches to Asia-centred regionalism that have these characteristics are more likely to be successful and long-lasting.

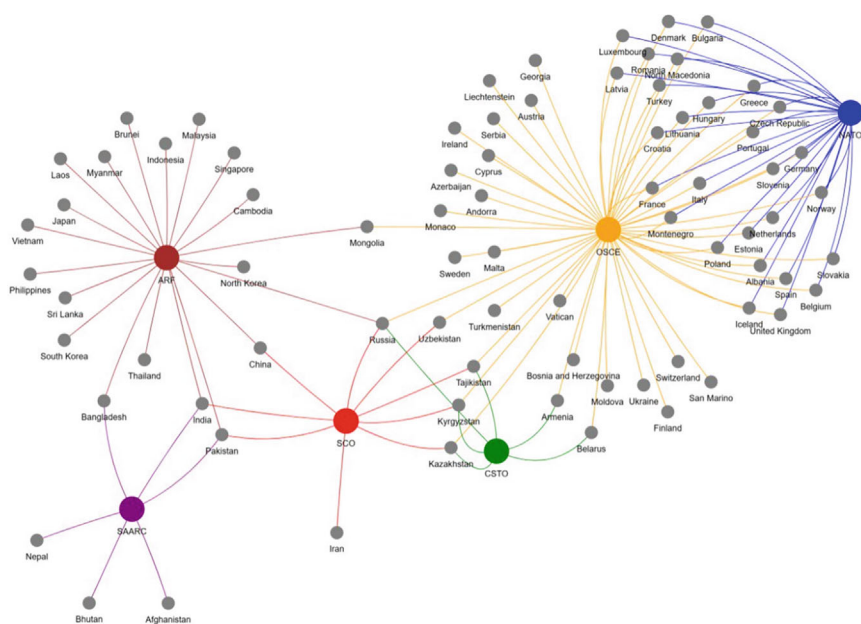


Fig. 3 Formats of security cooperation in Eurasia. *Source* Compiled by the authors

Conclusion

For many years, the problem of non-Western regionalism has been overshadowed due to the dominance of ideas around Eurocentric regionalism. In recent years, however, this area of research cannot be ignored in the context of ongoing macro-historical changes. There is a gradual shift from Eurocentric regionalism to a more polycentric system.

The case of Eurasia shows how different types of non-Western regionalism have emerged. The first type is post-Soviet regionalism (Russia-centric), which was closed and united countries mainly due to a common historical past, but has recently evolved in favour of greater openness and attracting Russian allies from other regions. The second type is Asia-centric regionalism (China-centric), which focuses on economic cooperation between countries. The third type is Turkic-centric regionalism in Eurasia, based not only on economic and military interests but also on common ethnic identity, religion, language, and culture. The fourth type is ASEAN-centric regionalism, which is formed on the principles of soft regulation, but does not cover political issues. Arab-centric (or Arab) regionalism could also be added to the third type, taking into account historical, ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic factors.

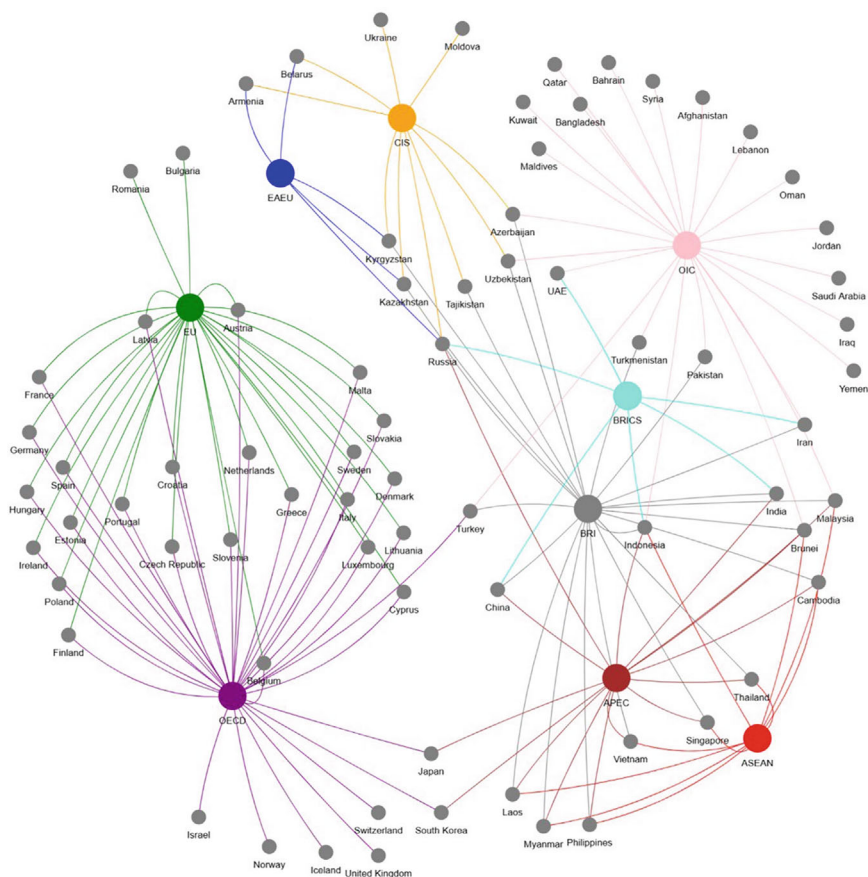


Fig. 4 Formats of economic and development cooperation in Eurasia. *Source* Compiled by the authors

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Essay 50: Towards Non-Western Regionalism: What Does the Regional Level of Analysis Explain About Contemporary IR?



Ekaterina Koldunova

Introduction

Starting in the 1960s, International Relations (IR) studies witnessed a number of efforts to create a conceptual framework for the analysis of regional processes, both at the global and national levels. Young's idea of political discontinuities, Russett's notion of the international regions, Cantori and Spiegel's regional subordinate system framework—all these conceptual approaches aimed at constructing the middle level of analysis between the international system and nation-state in times when two superpowers' global confrontation defined the majority of the international processes (Cantori & Spiegel, 1970; Russett, 1969; Young, 1968). These efforts, nevertheless, remained peripheral to the mainstream IR studies. The bipolar system generated a strong structural framework for the international dynamics (and therefore, for the theorising in IR) within which the regional context did not attract as much attention as the superpowers' struggle.

The end of the global confrontation between the USA and the USSR, rising economic interdependence and the growing complexity of international relations with the advent of emerging powers (many of them being first and foremost regional powers) and more visible regional institutions made the regional level of analysis more important practically and analytically too. Yet, for about three decades after the collapse of the bipolar system, the European Union (EU) model of regionalism remained the reference point for the majority of regional parts of the world. During that time, the EU's economic and political achievements at the regional level served as an attractive model to follow. By the mid-2010s, however, the variety of emerging regionalisms beyond Europe revealed specific features of regional processes in the non-Western regions, thus raising a question about the different types of regionalism

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A. Acharya et al. (eds.), *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-13642-8_50

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and their role in the construction/reconstruction of the global order (Solingen, 2015; Acharya, 2018; Voskressenski & Koller, 2019).

This essay argues that the ongoing divergence of the majority of regions of the world from the European experience proves two points. First, there is a more visible emergence of non-Western regionalism, which is just as important as the Western one. Second, the rise of regionalism worldwide reflects the ongoing movement of the international system towards its post-Western shape, which may well reproduce the anarchic/ multipolar state system that existed before the bipolarity, but on a structurally different foundation. In this system, various regionalisms may retain some universal features (e.g. the influence of geographical proximity on the state interaction) but at the same time demonstrate visible political, economic and social specifics.

Comparative Regionalism: A Research Field in the Making

Historically, Europe was the first international region which managed to consolidate itself in the form of an effective and long-lasting regional integration block, the European Union (EU). The economic, political, and legal experience of the EU's integration accumulated by the 1990s was unprecedented and, therefore, logically served as a reference point for those regions that tried to emulate the EU's experience of institutionalised regional cooperation. In parallel, subnational and supranational dynamics in Europe became a source of thinking concerning various dimensions of regionalism that were driven not only by states but also by non-state actors, intrastate regions, and transnational processes.

Thanks to the booming field of regional integration studies, European regionalism turned out to be quite attentively researched. Moreover, it served as an important point of theorising in the field of regional integration studies, generating the analytical frameworks, which for some time seemed to be universal. For example, Bela Balassa's (1962) stages of economic integration, ranging from a free trade area to a customs union, a common market, and finally an economic union, defined the analysis of regional integration maturity for many decades ahead. This line of thinking—making general assumptions based primarily on the Western experience—developed further until the early twenty-first century. In a 1998 paper, Ole Wæver spoke about IR, which for most of its intellectual life referred to American realities (Wæver, 1998). Sixteen years after that publication, in a 2014 German Institute of Global and Area Studies Working Paper, Johannes Vüllers still registered the remaining underrepresentation of non-Western cases in the IR studies (Vüllers, 2014). Analysing the geographical focus of almost 300 papers published in the main disciplinary journals, he noted a visible geographical asymmetry in the mainstream IR research in favour of Western cases. Logically, in these circumstances, the first attempts to compare regionalisms focused on contrasting non-European regionalisms to the European experience and looking for the sources of deviations.

By the turn of the century, it became evident that, on the one hand, the absence of the bipolar system's constraints led to the growing variety of regionalisms beyond Europe; and on the other hand, regionalisms did not lead to the functional regional integration or to the development of strong regional institutions similar to the European ones. In some cases, like in Central Asia or in the Middle East, the existence of regional commonality did not result in a working institutional framework, thus making some researchers claim that these regions demonstrated "virtual regionalism" or a state of a "region without regionalism" (Aarts, 1999, p. 211; Allison, 2008, p. 185).

It appeared that regional historical, social and cultural contexts had a strong impact on the way various regional institutions emerged, developed and functioned in different parts of the world (Acharya & Johnston, 2007). Moreover, depending on the situation in a particular region regionalism and its institutional embodiment, if existent, could have prioritised very different aspects of international interaction – from the facilitation of trade and connectivity (e.g. ASEAN since the 1990s) to the mitigation of the interstate controversies (e.g. the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) or even serving as a platform for peace building initiatives (e.g. the African Union).. In this picture, Europe remained just one out of many cases of regionalisms, with its specifics defined by its historical experience of development, not necessarily applicable worldwide.

Growing empirical evidence gathered based on further studies of regionalism beyond Europe allowed IR scholars to ponder the ways of more analytically sophisticated comparisons of different regionalisms (De Lombaerde et al., 2010). These comparisons now should include (but not be limited to) the following aspects: the organisational specifics of regional institutions, the types of economic interdependency, the role of non-institutional factors, normative dimensions of regionalism and more specifically, regional political and diplomatic cultures.

It is important to look for analytical tools that can help analyse regional integration properly and embody *any form* of economic and social interdependency. Asian Development Bank's Regional Cooperation and Integration Index may well serve as one such instrument with its operationalisation of integration through (1) trade and investment integration, (2) money and finance integration, (3) regional value chains, (4) infrastructure and connectivity, (5) people and social integration, (6) institutional arrangements, (7) technology and digital connectivity, and (8) environmental cooperation. (Asian Development Bank, 2021). Another avenue to develop further comparative research on regionalism is to look at the non-institutional and normative aspects of regionalisms. While the first aspect can shed light on the historical background, enabling countries to find different ways of regional and interregional co-existence and cooperation rather than the one accumulated by Europe, the second one can forge a better understanding of different regions' political and diplomatic culture. Obviously, notions such as Normative Power Europe, ASEAN Way, or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's (SCO) Shanghai Spirit emphasise normative aspects of regional commonalities but deliver different political messages. Comparative analysis of regional institutions' policy towards neighbourhood serves as another important object for studying the ability to accommodate other regions' interests

and the way they deal with the areas of shared neighbourhood. In this regard, the experience of the EU, ASEAN, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), SCO, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in communicating with their neighbours significantly diverges (Koldunova, 2019). Comparative analysis of regionalisms is also important in order to understand the ways regional cooperation can help small and middle-range countries to survive in the international system as independent/autonomous actors and to be able to influence the international processes in a direction favourable for them.

Towards Global Regionalism?

The empirical variety of regionalisms across the globe and their persistence despite various turbulences in the international system allow one to suggest the possibility of emerging global regionalism. I would define global regionalism as an analytical map demonstrating both specific features of different regionalisms and elements that constitute a universal core of regionalism.

The way of thinking about IR through the global regionalism lens can be analytically rewarding in the following ways. It can bring to the attention of scholars a body of empirical data coming from non-Western regions, thus enhancing the validity of the IR research and making it more context-sensitive (Busse et al., 2024). Structurally, thanks to the analysis of regionalism, the IR studies can consider not only the role of the strongest actors in the international system (i.e. great or emerging powers) but also the international contribution and role of smaller states and middle powers, which utilise regional frameworks to enhance their international capacity through the collective action. For example, the international experience of ASEAN at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries highlights the ability of its members in some situations to pinch above their own weight in dealing with such stronger partners as the USA and China.

An analytical map of global regionalism can generate a more accurate understanding of the current transformations of the world order, thanks to different factors. Since the very idea of regionalism requires taking into account such factors as time and space (and context, as mentioned earlier), the global regionalism approach avoids reductionism of such mainstream IR theories as neorealism or structural realism, which tend to concentrate on power relations and hierarchy. If developed further, it can contribute to a better understanding of historical and contemporary practices of international interactions beyond the Western world and the ways Western practices became a part of and developed in non-Western settings, thus forming hybrid political cultures and modernisation experiences worldwide.

Being context-sensitive, the global regionalism approach can help to define the best diplomatic and development practices, normative cultures of different regions, and best experiences for accommodating *others'* interests, thus contributing to conflict-settlement practices. At the same time, further development of the global regionalism approach needs to address such overlapping processes as globalisation/

de-globalisation, transregional projects' development (i.e. Belt and Road Initiative, Indo-Pacific frameworks, Greater Eurasian Partnership, etc.), and various political, political-strategic and political economy attempts to reconstruct the already existent geographical patterns of regionalism. Thus, the weakening or disruption of previously established global economic, social, and political linkages due to rising confrontation between the USA and China and Russia and the West reinforces regional connections. Russia tends to rely more on its Eurasian neighbourhood (China and the Eurasian Economic Union) while China enhances its economic connections with Southeast Asian states. Transregional projects like the Belt and Road Initiative and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (and its follow-up emanation as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership), on the contrary, challenge the regional integration projects implemented by such regional organisations as ASEAN since they selectively focus on just some of its members and create an alternative economic cooperation agenda.

Conclusion

Considerations presented above indicate, first, many faces of contemporary regionalism and, second, a growing global scope of it in the sense that almost all regions of the world now demonstrate one or another form of regionalism with quite distinct features. These two aspects allow one to move forward in terms of theorising in regionalism studies.

Its ambition, thus, should be in developing a theoretical toolbox, which allows (1) to analyse the universal features of regionalism, (2) to take into account regional context and specifics, and (3) global and transregional processes, which intersect with, run against or support regional dynamics. This essay contributes to answering some of the questions raised by this collective volume by indicating the avenues for future development of comparative research on regionalism and arguing that it can bring us closer to a better understanding of the post-Western world order in the making.

It deserves further analysis whether and, if so, to what extent the regional level of interaction can compensate for the dysfunctionality of the global level/failure of the global governance. A better understanding of the factors contributing to the international competitiveness of some regionalisms and the limited ability to influence the international process of others might become a core issue while studying the prospects of global regionalism's contribution to the restructuring of the global order. Finally, any attempts to define a more analytically complex approach to international relations studies/global order studies not reduced to just a hierarchy of states defined by power politics will require moving towards a more comprehensive theoretical toolkit of global regionalism. As challenging as this might seem, moving in this direction may well serve as an analytical reflection of the real development of a post-Western world in theory and in practice.

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Essay 51: Regionalism's Post-Soviet Eurasian Challenge: A Critical Perspective on Comparative Regionalism



Osman Ergül

Introduction

This essay addresses the challenges posed by the post-Soviet region to comparative regionalism, critically analysing its depiction in academic literature. While comparative regionalism has provided a valuable critique of EU-centric approaches to regional integration, it is essential to evaluate whether these analyses have transcended the liberal hegemonic framework that dominates much of the field. Post-Soviet Eurasia, with its diverse models of regional cooperation, presents a unique opportunity to explore alternative forms of integration that diverge from Western ideals. Although post-Soviet Eurasia often draws on European regional integration models, it fundamentally diverges in its principles and practices due to political pragmatism, as well as cultural, sociological, and historical factors. This divergence challenges regionalism theories, even within comparative analyses that, despite attempting to move beyond Eurocentrism, remain largely shaped by a liberal-democratic framework and fail to offer a sufficiently nuanced analysis of the region's distinct characteristics. Post-Soviet Eurasia is conceptualised as a *black swan* in comparative regionalism, not as an anomaly to be dismissed. The region provides a critical lens for examining alternative models of regional cooperation within asymmetrical power structures, not driven by liberal democratic values but reflecting a new international order.

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Post-Soviet Eurasia: A *Black Swan* in Comparative Regionalism

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is particularly noteworthy within the comparative regionalism literature due to its hybrid nature, representing a model increasingly referred to as a mixed form of old and new regionalism (Maksakova & Gajić, 2021). In this context, while economic cooperation continues to serve as the primary motivation for new regionalism initiatives, contemporary regionalism initiatives shift the focus toward the formation of regional identities based on consensus around regional security issues, which are closely tied to economic considerations and regional stability (Soderbaum, 2015). The theoretical debate on regionalism since the 2000s has been shaped by the proliferation of cooperation modalities that incorporate characteristics from both old and new regionalist practices, necessitating new designations. As Hettne (2005) and Soderbaum (2015) define it, this evolution moves *beyond* new regionalism, which is shaped by a global order characterised by diverse and often contradictory trends and processes. While the new regionalism of the 1990s was largely framed within the context of neoliberal globalisation, regional cooperation initiatives emerging in the 2000s have increasingly been analysed, especially by scholars in comparative regionalism, beyond the Eurocentric paradigms of neo-functionalism and neoliberal integration theories (Hettne & Soderbaum, 2007). These frameworks also consider the impact of asymmetrical power dynamics, historical legacies, and geopolitical factors on regional cooperation. This shift allows for a more nuanced understanding of regionalism, moving beyond strictly European-centric models and addressing the unique needs and characteristics of different regions (Börzel & Risse, 2019).

Scholars differ on whether Eurasian integration aligns with second-wave regionalism or represents a more *reproductive model*, signifying the “reconfiguration of its members’ characteristics and the interstate system they belong to” (Roberts & Moshes, 2015, p. 545). Some scholars (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2013; Gvosdev & Marsh, 2014; Kazharski, 2013) argue that mimicking EU-style deep integration with minimal sovereignty cession does not qualify as second-wave regionalism. In contrast, others, like Dutkiewicz and Sakwa (2015), Libman and Vinokurov (2012a, 2012b), and Sakwa (2015), offer an optimistic view of Eurasian economic integration. Glazyev and Tkachev see it as a pragmatic effort to enhance competitiveness by harmonising national laws. This debate reflects broader questions about whether Eurasian integration represents transformative regionalism or a symbolic, state-preserving form of cooperation. The discussion about the success of non-European integration initiatives and their resemblance to the EU model dates back to the 1960s. Nye (1968) describes regionalism in less developed areas as *token integration*, an ephemeral expression of a superstate community without restructuring interests (Roberts & Moshes, 2015, p. 547). Meanwhile, Maksimova (1960s), as cited by Shkvarya (2023), argues that classical (Western) ideas define regional economic integration, its stages, and the results confirming success or failure (Shkvarya, 2023,

p. 97). The EAEU thus exemplifies the interaction between economic goals and political aspirations in non-Western regionalism.

Although comparative analyses have increasingly contributed to the study of regionalism, there remains a significant gap in research on post-Soviet Eurasian integration. This gap is striking compared to the extensive attention given to regionalism in Southeast Asia and Latin America, where regional cooperation has highlighted non-Western visions of both regional and global cooperation. Concepts like post-hegemonic regionalism in Latin America (Tussie & Riggirozzi, 2012), post-neoliberal regionalism (Riggirozzi, 2015), and the *ASEAN Way* (Acharya, 1997) challenge the European integration model as a universal template. These concepts offer new interpretations of globalisation and geopolitics. Scholars like Peter Katzenstein (2005), with his idea of a *world of regions*, Amitav Acharya, emphasising the “emerging regional architecture of world politics” (2007), and Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003), who speak of a “global order of strong regions,” argue that regionalism is central to global international order, highlighting the growing significance of regional dynamics in shaping geopolitics.

Post-Soviet Eurasia has contributed to regionalism scholarship by introducing alternative frameworks that challenge traditional integration models. Concepts like *Plutocratic Regionalism* (Hancock, 2009), *Holding Together Regionalism* (Libman & Vinokurov, 2012a, 2012b), *Protective Regionalism* (Allison, 2010), and *Authoritarian Regionalism* (Libman & Obydenkova, 2018) offer insights into regional cooperation, particularly in authoritarian contexts. These frameworks emphasise state-driven initiatives that prioritise sovereignty and regional power, explaining why smaller states, like former Soviet republics, and authoritarian states like Russia, are willing to cede sovereignty to regional structures. However, while valuable, these perspectives provide a limited understanding of regional cooperation's internal dynamics. They do not fully capture the evolution of these processes or offer a comprehensive analysis of how actors' perspectives on cooperation change at both micro and macro levels.

These critical perspectives offer a limited understanding of regional cooperation, failing to capture the evolution of processes or the changing perspectives of actors at both micro and macro levels. Studies on post-Soviet regionalism in comparative regionalism remain limited. However, works like Lane and Samokhvalov's (2015) *The Eurasian Project and Europe* and Libman and Vinokurov's (2012b) *The Challenges of Continental Regionalism* address broader cooperation dynamics in post-Soviet Eurasia, going beyond power politics. While these studies provide a more comprehensive understanding, a gap remains in the literature that fully captures cooperation dynamics from a comparative regionalism perspective. This gap has been shrinking relatively since the mid-2010s, particularly with BRICS and the China-Russia rapprochement, which has been shaped by the geopolitical dynamics of the Ukraine-Russia conflict since 2014. To gain a more complete understanding of regional cooperation, it is essential to expand the analytical framework to consider not only external critiques but also the internal mechanisms and actor-driven dynamics at play. For instance, one critical question arises: why is the term *regionalism by authoritarian states* not used instead of *authoritarian regionalism*? This raises the

issue of whether the choice of terminology reflects a conceptual preference or serves a strategic decision aimed at achieving greater clarity or memorability. Furthermore, it is important to consider whether this term reflects a particular political perspective. *Authoritarian regionalism* not only highlights the specific nature of regional cooperation under authoritarian regimes but may also carry an implicit critique of such cooperation, often rooted in liberal democratic frameworks that view regional cooperation under authoritarian regimes as problematic, especially when measured against the principles of liberal democracy and political integration.

The reconfiguration of institutional cooperation models, which reshaped the regional power balance—sometimes at the expense of Russia’s asymmetrical power—has not been sufficiently discussed in post-Soviet Eurasian regionalisation literature. Most analyses focus on Russia’s foreign policy and attempts to assert regional hegemony, overlooking the contributions of other regional asymmetric powers in explaining global cooperation. The distinct role of Russia and post-Soviet Eurasia in global dynamics remains largely ignored. The EAEU’s evolving institutional cooperation reflects a shift towards a more balanced regional power structure, where smaller states like Belarus and Kazakhstan have secured concessions from Russia, challenging its dominance (Busygina & Filippov, 2018, p. 2).

The EAEU represents the first relatively successful attempt to strengthen post-Soviet regional integration. Compared to previous post-Soviet integration projects, the EAEU has a broader scope of supranationalism, and its multilateral institutions are based on the formal recognition of equal status for all members. As a result of the Ukrainian crisis and Russia’s marginalisation from the international system by Western political actors, the Chinese-Russian rapprochement has allowed post-Soviet countries to gain more independence from Russia. Furthermore, this situation offers them the opportunity to interpret their existence within post-Soviet integration as a means of gaining status through a meta-continental regional perspective, by developing multivectorial policies with China. Irina Busygina and Mikhail Filippov argue that the Ukrainian crisis in the spring of 2014, combined with the need to promote Russia’s image as a “great power,” created the incentives for Russian leadership to accept the institutional compromises needed to launch the Eurasian Economic Union (Busygina & Filippov, 2018, p. 18).

Furthermore, the alignment of these asymmetric actors with the perspectives and discourses of global cooperation has not been adequately examined until recent initiatives for rapprochement between Russia and China in Eurasia, a development arising from geopolitical considerations following the 2014 invasion of Ukraine. In this regard, the study of regionalism could play a significant role in supporting the initiative of *globalising IR* by representing a sub-discipline open to new ideas, theories, and methods, particularly those emerging from non-Western contexts (Acharya, 2014; Mehmetçik & Haksas, 2022). This would be possible if regionalism initiatives across the world, including post-Soviet Eurasia, are considered within their own dynamics and evaluations, independent of the Western liberal democratic perspective on cooperation. Acharya’s emphasis on the need for Global IR to develop homegrown concepts and move beyond Western typologies contrasts with his limited focus on the post-Soviet space and Russia in the context of *regional worlds* and comparative

regionalism. This gap reflects a broader challenge for both Western and Russian epistemic communities in overcoming ideological biases, which, as Libman argues, constrain comparative regionalism studies in Eurasia (Libman & Vinokurov, 2012b).

By contrast, much of the literature on post-Soviet regionalism compares post-Soviet integration initiatives to the European model. In the 1990s, post-Soviet regionalism was seen as ineffective, especially due to the failure of early initiatives like the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which were mainly aimed at addressing the collapse of Soviet structures. These initiatives were criticised as *virtual* or *failed* for not fostering real cooperation (Wirminghaus, 2012, p. 26; Kubicek, 2009, p. 239). Studies have shifted towards practical outcomes rather than the processes themselves, often highlighting the “lag of integration processes from the stated goals” (Shkvarya, 2023, p. 97), reflecting a Western methodological approach. By the mid-2000s, the EAEU's institutional structure, resembling the EU's model and adopting supranationalism, prompted a comparative analysis of the EAEU with the EU. This analysis often echoed the critiques of previous initiatives, focusing on their failure or use in reinforcing authoritarian governance and consolidating Russian hegemony. The EAEU, thus, became central to scholarly debates, particularly regarding its effectiveness compared to the European Union's advanced integration framework.

Western critiques of the EAEU centre on two main issues: whether post-Soviet states are coerced into membership due to Russia's power and the organisation's asymmetries, and whether the EAEU represents a successful regional integration initiative. Scholars like Libman (2020) argue that the EAEU has failed to meet its economic goals, pointing to structural deficiencies and Russia's disproportionate influence. The EAEU is often viewed as a geopolitical tool, aimed at reasserting Russian influence in the post-Soviet space and addressing globalisation's uncertainties. From this viewpoint, the EAEU is seen not as an independent regional integration project but as a hybrid *Janus Bifrons*—half-economic, half-political—serving Russia's broader strategic ambitions (Sergi, 2018). Scholars like Van Herpen (2014, p. 80) and Saivetz (2012, p. 402) argue from a neo-imperialist perspective, while others, like Mankoff, Sakwa, and Kropatcheva, see Eurasian regionalism from a defensive realism perspective (Kropatcheva, 2012; Mankoff, 2016; Sakwa, 2021). These perspectives view the EAEU not only as an imperial project but as a means for Russia to integrate into the international system and assert influence without destabilising the global order. Neo-institutionalist and constructivist approaches go beyond geopolitical rivalries, viewing Eurasian regionalism as a pragmatic response to globalisation, a tool for asserting regional sovereignty, and a form of *holding-together regionalism* (Lane & Samokhvalov, 2015; Libman & Vinokurov, 2012a). Scholars like Vasilyeva and Lagutina (2011, p. 166) argue that the Eurasian Union represents a shift towards a new world order, where global regions, rather than nation-states, emerge as the primary actors, aligning Russia's regional policies with global trends in regional cooperation.

Eurasian integration faces two main challenges. First, regional cooperation is often conceptualised as a static process, with interchangeable terms like regionalisation, regionalism, and integration used without sufficient conceptual clarity. Van Langenhove highlights a second challenge: the strategic use of conceptual ambiguity

to reinforce specific arguments (Van Langenhove, 2013, p. 474). For instance, designating the EAEU as a *union* creates the perception of a fully realised integration project, when it is still an evolving process that began in the 1990s. The ambiguity around the EAEU's economic goals—whether it aims for full economic integration or a flexible framework—fuels speculative discussions on political unification. Such discursive tendencies position the EAEU within frameworks of new regionalism and liberal economic integration, influencing interpretations and critiques (Obydenkova, 2011, p. 151).

Consequently, key terms like integration, supranationalism, and globalisation emphasise the evolving nature of post-Soviet Eurasian cooperation, marking it as a crucial area of regionalism research. The term *supranationalism* in the post-Soviet context highlights the divergence from liberal democratic norms and the challenges of post-Soviet regional cooperation. Russia-centred analyses do not frame regionalism or globalisation within the liberal paradigm; instead, they assess the geopolitical landscape's structural implications. For Russia, regional cooperation is seen as a strategic tool for balancing power dynamics and integrating into the global system. In contrast, Western comparative regionalism adopts a normative approach, emphasising models of regional integration based on liberal globalisation and economic-political integration, largely informed by the European experience. For Russia and its regional partners, neither supranationalism nor globalisation carries the same meaning as in Western discourse. The Eurasian Union, grounded in a top-down model, contrasts with the EU's bottom-up cooperation strategy. Unlike the EU, the Eurasian project prioritises state supremacy in decision-making, aiming to expand regional cooperation while ensuring state control. While its institutional framework may resemble the EU's, the underlying conceptual approach remains fundamentally different. The introduction of *sovereign democracy* (Surkov, 2009) and *sovereign globalisation* (Gould-Davies, 2016) in Russian discourse, alongside the use of supranationalism to describe Eurasian cooperation, underscores Russia's departure from Western liberal models. These concepts reflect Russia's unique strategic priorities, emphasising national sovereignty and an asymmetrical regional order. Two perspectives emerge when analysing Russia's strategic approach. The first perspective views Russia as manipulating both existing and newly formulated global concepts to advance its national interests (Kazharski, 2013, p. 8). The second suggests that Russia's conceptual engagement is an adaptive response to international structural dynamics, using liberal economic terminology to enhance its administrative capacity and economic competitiveness, while legitimising its global ambitions (Lane & Samokhvalov, 2015).

Conclusion

The contemporary modalities of regional cooperation, shaped mainly by asymmetric powers, represent a hybrid model that fuses traditional old and new elements of regionalism (Börzel, 2011, p. 5). These models are designed to internalise the norms

and practices of the asymmetrical regional power by secondary, less influential actors. Such hybrid models are emblematic of the evolving nature of asymmetric regional cooperation in a world transitioning through an interregnum. According to Qoraboyev, this makes the Eurasian region an invaluable case study for understanding the dynamics of contemporary regionalism, particularly as asymmetrical powers on both regional and global scales instrumentalise it (Qoraboyev, 2010). This suggests that a non-liberal, statist vision of regional order is preferred in Russia, not only as a top-down strategy by the government but also as a politically pragmatic framework supported by public opinion (Güneylioğlu, 2022, p. 325). In Russia, economic rights often take precedence over human rights, which supports the foundations of the statist order. The pursuit of order and economic stability takes priority over liberal political and social norms (Kobayashi, 2017). Deyermond argues that a similar sociological situation exists in post-Soviet Eurasia, where the Eurasian Union exemplifies the creation of an institutionalised, hierarchical regional order that reinforces Russian regional hegemony and sustains a *matryoshka hegemony* (Deyermond, 2009). This order also sustains an economic system that reproduces a top-down hierarchy, enabling political elites to legitimise their decisions and status. The Soviet legacy continues to influence the logic of regional cooperation among political elites in post-Soviet Eurasia, reinforcing a *path dependence* in the evolution of cooperation dynamics. In this context, regionalism is often viewed as a tool to empower states within the regional balance of power, rather than as a constraint on their sovereignty, much like the *matryoshka hegemony*. Post-Soviet Eurasian regionalism has evolved primarily through sovereignty shaping and bureaucratic strengthening, with the processes of state formation and regional integration mutually influencing each other (Russo, 2023, p. 223).

Considering the evolution of the scope and institutional framework of post-Soviet Eurasian cooperation, it is notable that this evolution is still in progress, particularly in finding ways to overcome its ineffectiveness. However, a critical question remains as to whether these efforts are assessed with suitable criteria for effectiveness. For example, the extent to which the regime-boosting functions of the cooperation process fulfil the needs of enhancing national sovereignty should also be considered.

In this regard, the regionalism process is particularly significant for states in the making, which must establish statehood while navigating residual interdependence and weak governance. As these states reframe their national identities, they often align with external regional models, which may not always be liberating (Russo, 2023, p. 224). Post-Soviet states adopt varying regional strategies. The Baltic states, for example, prioritise European integration and NATO membership, distancing themselves from Soviet-era organisations, a strategy known as the *Baltic way* (Burakovsky, 2004). In contrast, Ukraine and Georgia follow a *mixed* approach, balancing closer ties with the West while selectively engaging with post-Soviet frameworks. Moldova is torn between European integration and Russian-led initiatives like the EAEU, reflecting competing external pressures on its state-building. Armenia's participation in the CSTO and the EAEU is driven more by security concerns than purely regional aspirations. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, balances its involvement

in the EAEU with ties to China's Belt and Road Initiative, showcasing how the post-Soviet space does not follow a singular trajectory but involves multiple, sometimes competing, region-building processes.

These examples support the argument that states in the making align with externally directed regional imaginaries, shaped by broader geopolitical constraints and strategic calculations, rather than purely emancipatory or autonomous goals (Russo, 2023, p. 37). This highlights that concepts such as *regionhood*—what distinguishes a region from a non-region—and *regionality*—what distinguishes one region from another—help explain this situation. The post-Soviet region represents a clear case where different types of regionhood coexist, with its regionality being diversely constructed by the policies of various region-makers and the national and global ambitions and constraints of regional actors over the past two decades. The diffusion of norms and political rivalry over principles and cultural values in post-Soviet Eurasian cooperation has been examined through analyses that merge constructivist and neorealist perspectives. These analyses elucidate the interactions and competition between the European Union's neighbourhood policies and the Eurasian Union, emphasising that both initiatives aim to propagate divergent values and norms. In this context, these two projects are viewed as competing regional-building processes (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2017). However, the controversy arises from the fact that the Eurasian Union is often solely analysed through the lens of regional hegemony. While the European Union is defined as a region-building model focused on norms and values, the Eurasian Union, primarily due to Russia's asymmetric influence and reliance on principles of sovereignty and the inviolability of borders, fundamental international legal norms, leans more towards integrating actors rather than promoting norms.

Consequently, terms such as *competition* and *conflict*, which emphasise disparities and rivalry, have been frequently used in these analyses. Concepts like *competition of integration*, *clash of integration* (Casier, 2007), and *norm competition* (Popescu & Willson, 2009, p. 48) encapsulate the general perspective. While these studies have contributed significantly to our understanding of post-Soviet Eurasian regionalism in the context of regional order and norm formation, it is important to note that the critical emphasis on the lack of liberal norms often oversimplifies the complex motivations and logic driving these regional initiatives. The *democracy against autocracy* narrative, frequently promoted in Western discourse (Kobayashi, 2017), complicates the understanding of the evolving normative dynamics within the region. The idealisation of Western liberal and democratic norms, particularly in scholarship that frames European integration as the primary model for regional cooperation, has constrained a broader understanding of how regions and regional perspectives contribute to global cooperation. This literature often undervalues examples of regionalism in states with autocratic tendencies, missing an opportunity to explore how different regions engage with global cooperation dynamics at various levels, from micro to macro.

The rise of Eurasian regionalism should not be seen solely as an attempt to completely dismantle the Western-dominated liberal international order. Rather, it represents an effort to integrate into the global system while pursuing national reforms

aimed at enhancing the region's political and economic influence, thereby restoring Russia's significant role in the international arena. Richard Sakwa (2021) highlights Russia's political ambition to be part of both a *Greater Europe* and a *Greater West*. Russia's political drive to construct a *Greater Eurasia*—primarily through developing cooperation modalities between the Eurasian Union and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—provides a vital platform for discussing the practical and theoretical evolution of regionalism, as well as analysing the strategic interactions of significant powers within the global system (Sakwa, 2021, p. 7).

Krikovic and Pellicari (2021) offer a comprehensive explanatory framework for understanding Russia's quest for international status, categorising it under three fundamental dimensions: social mobility, social creativity, and social competition. This categorisation also provides a pathway for understanding idiosyncratic conceptualisations such as sovereign democracy and sovereign globalisation, as well as the hybrid characteristics of post-Soviet Eurasian regionalism. Social mobility signifies Russia's political will, particularly in the 1990s, to integrate into the Western economic and political framework; social creativity marks a period in which Russia sought to establish new and alternative modalities, norms, and principles distinct from those of the liberal, Western international order. Social competition encapsulates the phase in which the social creativity strategy led to a direct political confrontation between Russia and the West (Krikovic & Pellicari, 2021, p. 90). Evaluating the process from the perspective of creating order or region-building opens up new avenues for analysis.

A comprehensive analysis is required, one that not only compares the institutional designs of regional cooperation across different contexts, particularly with the European experience, but also evaluates how the regionalism process has been influenced by historical identity-building, region-building, economic interdependence, and security dynamics. By incorporating these elements, we can achieve a more holistic understanding of regional dynamics, moving beyond EU-centric views on regional integration and liberal hegemonic assumptions about international cooperation. The post-Soviet region presents a significant challenge for scholars in comparative regionalism. The historical and political context of the region, marked by the complex legacy of Soviet influence, diverse national identities, and ongoing geopolitical tensions, complicates the application of conventional regionalism theories, particularly those based on the European integration model. This gap is especially evident in approaches examining the impact of regions on the international system, offering conceptual insights into frameworks like the *world of regions* or *multi-plex world order* (Acharya, 2007, 2017). Studies emphasising identity, community-building, and elite narratives—especially those extending beyond liberal theoretical perspectives—have yet to incorporate the post-Soviet space fully.

Moreover, the relative lack of extensive scholarly attention, coupled with a dominant focus on Western-centric models that treat regional initiatives as end products rather than dynamic processes, exacerbates the difficulty in achieving a comprehensive understanding of Eurasian regionalism. Approaches like Tanja Börzel's innovative use of post-functionalism to analyse intra-regional trade as a proxy for economic

interdependence offer invaluable insights into the complexity of regionalism, highlighting how these models contrast with the density and strength of regionalism in other major global regions (Börzel & Risse, 2019).

Understanding the Eurasian Union through post-functionalism is crucial because it emphasises that regionalism in this context extends beyond economic integration. Börzel and Risse (2019) argue that regionalism involves three key elements: functional demands for regionalism, which include broader interdependence beyond economic ties; elite efforts at regional identity-building, where leaders cultivate a shared identity that resonates with regional publics; and the diffusion of institutional designs, where local circumstances shape regional institutions. This approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of Eurasian regionalism, which is not solely focused on economic cooperation but also on political, social, and security factors. In this regard, exploring the region necessitates the development of innovative theoretical frameworks and methodologies that transcend traditional paradigms of liberal democratic integration. Furthermore, understanding the post-Soviet space, particularly Eurasian regionalism with its distinct characteristics, holds considerable potential for advancing future research in comparative regionalism, positioning it as a crucial subdiscipline that can contribute to the broader field of Global International Relations.

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Essay 52: Decentering Regionalism Thinking: A Comparative Perspective from Latin America and Eastern Europe



Gaëlle Le Pavic and Anthony Enríquez Palacios

Introduction

Decentering thinking involves moving away from traditional centres of knowledge production and rethinking from different perspectives. In the European context, decentering emphasises shifting away from Eurocentric and Western-centric approaches that regard (Western) Europe as the gold standard for other regions. Literature on decentering the European agenda has highlighted the need to provincialise Europe, critiquing the universal claims of European modernity by demonstrating that non-European histories can offer alternative modernities not rooted in the colonial exploitation of other people and land resources (Chakrabarty, 1992). However, Walter Mignolo and Madina Tlostanova (2006, p. 218) argue that even these alternative modernities often remain grounded in an epistemologically Eurocentric perspective. They call for “alternatives TO modernity,” emphasising that coloniality remains constitutive of modernity, even in its alternative forms. Over the past decade, calls for decentering the European agenda have underscored the urgency of recentring other historical and lived experiences, particularly those of people for whom Europe signifies centuries of appropriation and exploitation (see, for example, Onar & Nicolaïdis, 2013, p. 286).

The region framed as the East of Europe challenges this approach. Firstly, due to the othering of *the East of Europe*, seen as both inside and similar, and outside and different. This conception partly relies on Orientalized imaginaries of the *East*, forged with the contribution of Western European travellers over centuries (Bielousova,

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2022). Secondly, decentering from the East of Europe involves grasping the challenges of the *posts*: post-communism, post-socialism, and post-Soviet, which often remain unexamined (Tlostanova, 2017). Additionally, the role of Russia as a Janus-faced empire with dual orientation—one towards the perceived success and modernity of *the West*, to which Russia is a colony, and the other towards its own (former) colonies (Tlostanova, 2008)—further complicate this process. These different dimensions make decentering regionalism thinking from East Europe challenging and interesting.

Although regional processes have unique characteristics that distinguish them from each other, theories of regionalism do not reflect this variety. Acharya (2016, p. 109) states that “[r]egionalism is not a European or Western idea or approach but has had a worldwide heritage and multiple manifestations. But theories of regionalism barely reflect this fact. Its theoretical literature remains European Union (EU)-centric.” The predominance of theories related to the EU’s experience in the analysis of regionalism has generated errors in the approaches and understandings of regional processes worldwide, making the case of South America a clear example. For Vivares (2023), European Union-centrism has generated a conceptual prison that distorts the reality and methodological analysis of regionalism in South America. A conceptual prison is a theoretical category that has been emptied of its temporality and context to be used as a rationalised model of how reality works, becoming an ahistorical perspective (Vivares et al., 2014).

In this context, the necessity to generate a process of decentralisation of knowledge and theoretical production of regionalism arises. Decentering thinking implies leaving the conceptual prison of the EU-centred vision and creating spaces that allow *other* voices of regionalism to be heard (Marchad & Meza, 2016). In the South American case, decentralisation would allow thinking about the region from its own needs and perspectives, which implies the inclusion of groups invisibilised by the traditional Eurocentric academic scenario.

The traditional ideas of European regionalism have been challenged by South American social movements and academics seeking to propose other ways of thinking and understanding regionalism outside the European Union-centrist visions (Vivares & Herrera-Vinelli, 2020). Since 2006, these local actors have generated a different analysis and process of regionalism that prioritises the well-being of the peoples, respect for the sovereignty of the countries, respect for indigenous communities, care for the environment, and even an agenda far removed from purely commercial interests. This approach proposes a different process of analysis and construction of regionalism that places the needs and characteristics of the region at the centre, making South America an interesting case for analysing and understanding the phenomenon of decentralisation in the study of regionalism.

Although the decentralisation process in the East of Europe and South America differs, they are not entirely unrelated. Insights from decentralisation in the East of Europe can inform the South American process and vice versa. For both the East of Europe and the South American cases, Western Europe has long dominated regionalism studies, offering a prescriptive model based on its history, institutions, and priorities, establishing the European Union model as the basis for analysis and

generating a conceptual prison. However, this prescriptive approach can be shifted by decentering Europe to a descriptive analysis that values regional experiences on their own terms despite strong external pressure in both contexts. Crucially, this comparative perspective breaks the homogenising view of *Europe* that tends to erase the diversity, often at the expense of the East of Europe. We thus argue that a comparative perspective enables us to rethink regionalism in both regions, avoiding essentialising them and enriching the analysis with complexity.

Breaking the bars of conceptual prisons generated by the theoretical centralisation of Western Europe can also contribute to the decentralisation process in South America. This shift introduces pluralistic views that allow us to appreciate the characteristics of other geographical spaces, such as colonial history, economic inequality, and cultural diversity, that influence and characterise the processes of South American regionalism. By embracing these distinct features, South America can become a central actor in the study of regionalism by presenting approaches centred on its own experiences. Similarly, Eastern Europe can challenge its peripheral positioning by moving beyond narratives that cast Western Europe as the dominant political and socio-economic centre, allowing for a more balanced and inclusive understanding of regional dynamics.

Decentralisation in the analysis and study of comparative regionalism is crucial as it helps overcome the limitations generated by prescriptive and normative approaches derived from specific regional experiences. One of the primary advantages of decentralisation in comparative regionalism is its ability to facilitate more nuanced and detailed comparisons. By moving beyond a single centralised and prescriptive framework, it enables the analysis of regional processes from their own contexts and needs. This approach allows for a more precise identification of both differences and similarities, fostering a deeper and more contextually grounded understanding of regional dynamics in South America, the East of Europe, and beyond.

Defining the *East* of Europe poses inherent challenges. While the opposition of East vs. West remains frequent, it is less explicit as to where the limits of these two antagonised areas stand. In our essay, we mostly follow the delimitation by Trubina et al. (2020, p. 9), who include in the *East* 30 Post-socialist countries: the Visegrád Group (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia); the Yugoslav successor states (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia & Hercegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia); the (other) Balkan states (Romania, Bulgaria, Albania) and the 15 successor states of the Soviet Union. By delimiting this space, we already present a categorisation into regions. We emphasise the human-made design of these delimitations and, thus, their potential contestation, even in regions where geography appears as a prominent feature (e.g., the South Caucasus). However, delimiting the *East* as such enables us to explore, from a decentering perspective, the main tension when it comes to regionalism and regional integration, namely the antagonism between, on the one hand, the Western-led European Union and the Russia-led integration projects such as the Eurasian Economic Union on the other.

Founded by Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, which signed the Rome treaties in 1957, the European Union today has 27 countries.

The successive enlargements included the Visegrád Group, Slovenia, and three countries commonly framed as *Baltic*: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (2004), Romania and Bulgaria (2007) and Croatia (2013), while Bosnia & Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine became candidate countries between 2005 and 2023. The willingness of the Georgian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian governments to apply for EU membership highlights a significant shift in regionalism against the backdrop of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has been unfolding since February 24, 2022. However, regional thinking often remains Western-European-centric, with models such as the centre-periphery being prevalent. Thus, this essay answers calls for decentering the European agenda (Onar & Nicolaidis, 2013) and provincialising Europe (Chakrabarty, 1992) to better understand the view from the *East of Europe*. We acknowledge that this exercise carries an inherent risk of essentialising this *view from the East of Europe*, yet we strive to include those views in an attempt to decenter regionalism thinking.

Latin American regionalism is usually analysed and discussed as a homogeneous entity. However, Latin America is a broad region with many nuances and differences, which in many cases makes it a fragmented region in terms of understanding and thinking about regionalism (Malamud, 2016). For Vivares (2023), there are two Latin Americas when talking about regionalism: one from Panama to the north and the other to the south. This situation is due to a unique geopolitical characteristic of the continent: its proximity to the world hegemony, the United States.

The eighties and nineties saw an important reconfiguration of Latin American regionalism, and the free trade processes carried out by the United States led to a political and economic disengagement of Mexico and Central America from the rest of the continent (Malamud, 2016). Central and North America assume an idea of open regionalism linked to the market. South America, on the other hand, favours a more populist and developmentalist regionalism that allows it to separate itself, in certain aspects, from U.S. hegemony, generating a shift from Latin American to South American regionalism (Vivares, 2023).

From South America, which includes Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay, and Venezuela, spaces for thinking about regionalism in a different way were created. The formation of UNASUR in 2008, as the first integration organisation that gathered the 12 countries of the region, evidenced this more local posture, far from hegemony (Long & Bonilla, 2010). Because of this, this essay will focus on South America and its contributions to the decentralisation of thinking, avoiding falling into a homogenised vision of the continent.

Reflecting on the authors' *standpoint* is a crucial part of the decentering process in knowledge production. We are early-career scholars embedded in both regions where we conducted our PhD research and have extensive lived experience, including linguistic knowledge. This essay results from ongoing discussions which started in Quito, Ecuador, and continued in Brussels and Bruges, Belgium. We take this piece as a step in a larger process of questioning knowledge production, looking in particular

at the voices that are silenced by the current balance of power, informed by coloniality (Meghji, 2021; Mignolo, 2013).

Before exploring South American regionalism from a decentralised perspective, it is necessary to understand the conceptual cages that limit the understanding of regionalism and that have made other ways of thinking about regionalism in this part of the world invisible. The analysis of South American regionalism has two conceptual cages: the European Union-centric perspective and the American liberal institutional perspective (Vivares, 2023; Vivares & Herrera-Vinelli, 2020).

The European Union-Centric Perspective

The European Union-centric perspective is based on the functionalist theoretical postulates of Mitrany and the neo-functionalism of Haas. This approach has two central postulates for analysing regional processes. First, it postulates the ceding of sovereignty and the creation of supranational institutions as essential elements of a regional integration process (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2018). The second characteristic highlights that the integration process is sustained only under strong trade and economic integration (Malamud, 2011; Oyarzun, 2008).

While the European Union experience is important and can contribute much to understanding regionalism, using these characteristics as universal indicators to measure and understand regionalism in South America has limited its analysis. Authors such as Malamud and Schmitter (2006), in their text *The European integration experience and Mercosur's integration potential*, make an evaluation of Mercosur's regional project based on the European experience, starting from the premise that "if Mercosur wishes to advance towards greater integration, it could learn from the pattern established by Europe" (Malamud & Schmitter, 2006, p. 16). Part of the conclusions of the text highlight that due to the lack of supranational institutions, trade flows, and contact between elites, MERCOSUR has not made progress in the integration process.

It is important to point out that the evaluation based on the experience of the European Union is not only at the level of theoretical analysis, but decision-makers also fall into conceptual jails when evaluating the processes. In 2018, upon assuming the pro tempore presidency of UNASUR, Bolivian President Evo Morales mentioned that to reactivate the integration process, "UNASUR should be like the European Union" (Morales, 2018).

The European Union process had unique particularities that are distant from the reality and needs of South America, so its use limits reality rather than helping to interpret it (Vivares et al., 2014). Despite the clear contradictions, the pressure of certain academic communities and the European diplomatic influence has made the European Union-centric vision the most influential conceptual prison in the region (Vivares, 2023).

The American Liberal Institutional Perspective

The American liberal institutional perspective is based on a neo-realist and institutional liberal theoretical foundation (Vivares, 2023). This perspective is characterised by two aspects that have influenced the analysis of South American regionalism, becoming another conceptual prison. First, at the methodological level, this perspective puts forward a *scientific* research method based on testing variables, elaborating correlations, and a positivist ontological vision of reality (Vivares & Herrera-Vinelli, 2020). The second characteristic that emerges from this perspective is that regionalism is a process that occurs from above, meaning through governmental initiatives or formal actors.

While these perspectives may be useful, they also become conceptual prisons. According to Vivares (2023), the greatest effect of this perspective in the analysis of South American regionalism is at the methodological level since the *scientific* rigidity presented by this theory limits the possibilities of analysing dynamics outside its realistic vision, such as informal forms of governance that are common within the region.

Decentralising Regionalism from the South

Conceptual cages have limited and made invisible many alternative ways of thinking about regionalism in South America. However, for several years now, local social movements and academics have sought to propose different and decentralised ways of understanding regionalism in the region (Berrón, 2007). In 2006, the first congress for the Integration of the Peoples of South America was held in Cochabamba, Bolivia. In this space, social movements, workers, indigenous groups, women, and academics pointed out that integration and regionalism issues should not only belong to foreign ministers and presidents, but citizens should also participate in the decisions and analyses of the South American regionalism process (Rosa et al., 2006).

Through their participation, the aim was to generate multiple and different ways of understanding, analysing, and conceiving South American regionalism. Breaking away from the conceptual prisons (European Union-centric perspective—American Liberal Institutions) that evaluate the South American regionalism process from visions such as supranationalism and the creation of a free trade zone, elements that are distant from the realities of the region and do not respond to the needs that the social movements were identifying. Taking this into account, along with the analytical contributions of social and academic movements in the region, a decentralised analysis of South American regionalism can be explored through two main points: (1) the strengthening of national capacities, and (2) the dislocation of the trade agenda.

Strengthening National Capacities

The traditional European Union centrist approach places the transfer of sovereignty from national states to a new supranational centre as a central condition for a regional process (Malamud, 2011; Oyarzun, 2008). Within this process, the aim is to create a communitarian law that overrides domestic law so that the process of regional integration acquires its dynamics (Oyarzun, 2008). This very particular characteristic of the European process acquired such importance that all regional projects that did not comply with the cession of sovereignty were labelled as incomplete or deficient (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2018).

From a decentralised approach to South American regionalism, the universality of this characteristic has been questioned. According to Ferrer (2014), in South America, regional processes do not seek to limit or cede sovereignty; on the contrary, the regionalist process is a tool that strengthens national capacities to confront the influence of U.S. hegemony. Under this approach, regionalism in South America is characterised by an intergovernmental institutionality that seeks to coordinate and reinforce certain national aspects without ceding sovereignty. The defence of national autonomy became the main motivation for the formation of a South American regional process (Ferrer, 2014; Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2018).

The Dislocation of the Trade Agenda

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, South America initiated a new regional process (Quiliconi & Salgado Espinoza, 2017). Within this period, four regional organisations were created: The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). These organisations were characterised by a multi-thematic political agenda far removed from traditional trade integration objectives. The break with the trade agenda opened up spaces for cooperation on key issues such as security, energy, public health, and infrastructure, among others. According to Quiliconi and Salgado Espinoza (2017), the amplitude of issues and the dislocation of the trade agenda allowed the emergence of multiple organisations, generating an *à la carte* regionalism.

These characteristics of the new regionalism process forced a rethinking of the theoretical analysis of regionalism in the region. From the conceptual prisons, regionalism processes are marked by a commercial logic. The different stages of trade-economic integration generate incentives that strengthen the regional process and the States' commitment. Under this approach, authors such as Malamud and Gardini (2012) state that the break with the trade agenda and the proliferation of projects represent a fragmentation of the region and a weakening in the consolidation of regional projects. However, from the point of view of social movements and local academic groups (Quiliconi & Salgado Espinoza, 2017; Rosa et al., 2006; Vivares,

2023), the dislocation of the agenda does not represent a setback in the process of regionalism or a fragmentation of the region; on the contrary, South America is experiencing a process of regional governance where each organisation assumes different social issues as well as political positions. This way, the spectrum of action, including social elements, is broadened. In turn, countries can choose their participation in regional spaces according to their needs and interests. Under this approach, the analysis of an agenda that breaks away from commercial and economic objectives distances itself from the conceptual prisons that evaluate regional development on a commercial basis and gives way to an analysis centred on the reality and needs of the region.

Examining regionalism in the *East of Europe* through a decentered lens involves addressing three conceptual cages: (1) thinking of regional integration in terms of progress, conditioning the East of Europe integration into the EU; (2) the perception of the East of Europe as a buffer zone, between the EU and Russia a liminal status that is increasingly contested; and (3) the dominance of hegemonic regionalism, which prioritises state boundaries, while neglecting alternative forms of regionalism.

Reunification vs. Enlargement: Rethinking Western Europe Conditionality

The year 2024 marked twenty years of EU membership for ten countries, eight of which are located in what we term the East of Europe, also named Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Many in the East of Europe perceive this membership as a reunification after a forced separation materialised by *an iron curtain* (Šeščovič, 2020), an approach echoed in the academic literature (Primatarova, 2016; Torreblanca, 2017). Recently, the Georgian president declared at the European Parliament: “We want to reunite with our European family” amidst protests against the law on the “transparency of foreign influence,” which mirrors a Russian law regulating foreign funding (Zourabichvili, 2023). At the end of 2024, the Georgian Prime Minister’s decision to postpone the opening of EU accession negotiations triggered a massive popular protest in a country where 80% of the population favours joining the EU.

However, the EU does not have a policy of *reunification* but follows a codified enlargement process that is highly conditional, from the beginning, when a third country becomes a candidate for membership, to the conclusion when the country becomes an EU member state. The main phase consists of negotiations, which require the mandatory adoption of the EU *acquis communautaire*, divided into 33 chapters encompassing EU legislation.

While we do not engage in the normative debate on the desirability of such reforms, we highlight the EU’s absolute decision-making power in the institutionalised processes of screening the application, negotiating, and closing the chapter, during which a candidate country must implement a growing set of binding EU legislation. Acknowledging that applying to become an EU member is a voluntary

process, academics also unveil the normative coloniality at stake when aspiring to *reunite with Europe*, regionally embodied by the EU as a normative power and even empire (Böröcz et al., 2001; Laïdi, 2007).

Liminality: A Contested In-Betweenness—Rethinking the Perception of the East of Europe as a Buffer Zone, In-Between the EU and Russia

Europe, But Not Quite is a common standpoint when considering regionalism from an Eastern European perspective (Ściborska, 2022). To conceptualise this in-betweenness, the post-colonial anthropology concept of liminality has been put forward as *particularly apt* for capturing elements of post-communism (Otoiu, 2003). Liminality highlights the challenges of such a position, as “established structures are dislocated, hierarchies reversed, and traditional settings of authority possibly endangered” (Mälksoo, 2012). While academic literature acknowledges that forms of agency emerge from this in-betweenness of the East of Europe (Amoris, 2024), significant difficulties also arise. Scholars have highlighted the challenges for countries situated between the EU and Russia in managing political, economic, and social interdependence (Torbakov, 2013).

When looking at regionalism and particularly at regional integration schemes, these challenges have been exacerbated over the past decade as Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine signed Association Agreements (AA) coupled with a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA) with the EU in 2014. These agreements, including a common external tariff, prevent countries from adhering to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and its Customs Union (CU), comprising Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. Notably, Armenia had pre-signed the AA/DCFTA before eventually joining the EEU/CU due to economic, social, and, most importantly, security considerations.

In Ukraine, former President Viktor Yanukovich’s refusal to sign the AA and DCFTA in favour of joining the EEU sparked the Euromaidan protest movement, leading to a government change and the subsequent signing of the AA and DCFTA (Kuzio, 2017). The conflicting regional projects between the elite, society, and the business sector led to the separation of part of the Donbas region and the formation of the LNR and DNR (Samokhvalov, 2015). Russia’s full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, ended the “hybrid stage of the conflict” (Kormych et al., 2023) that began in 2014 following the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing fighting in part of the Donbas region.

The Dominance of Hegemonic Regionalism, Which Prioritises State Boundaries, While Neglecting Alternative Forms of Regionalism: Rethinking Euro and Russia-Centric Regional Integration Schemes

Like enlargement, European regional integration schemes are based on the voluntary adhesion of countries within a certain geographical area. Following the 2004 EU enlargement/reunification, the European Union borders shifted further east, prompting the establishment of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The goal is “to help the EU support and foster stability, security, and prosperity in the countries closest to its borders” (European External Action Service, 2021). The ENP was later divided into southern and eastern sections, with the eastern section incorporated into the *Eastern Partnership* (EaP) in 2009, encompassing six countries, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, collectively referred to as the *Eastern Neighbourhood*. The EaP originated from a joint Polish-Swedish proposal following the 2008 Russian-Georgian war and Russia’s recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which the EU condemned in support of Georgia’s territorial integrity (Dekanozishvili, 2017). While the EU and scholars emphasise that “nothing is imposed in this policy!”, the ENP remains underpinned by asymmetric relationships between *Europe* and its former colonies or other peripheral regions (Horký-Hlucháň & Kratochvíl, 2014). Additionally, scholars highlight the ambiguous and ill-defined nature of the notion of *partnership* within the ENP (Korosteleva, 2011), with different countries included under the *neighbourhood* label (Jeandesboz, 2007).

The Eurocentric term *neighbourhood* is mirrored by Russia’s perception of its own *neighbourhood*, leading to analyses of “the contest between the EU and Russia in their shared neighbourhood” (Bechev, 2015). Russia fosters mainly bilateral relations with countries it considers part of its *neighbourhood*, often referred to as the *near abroad* (*ближнее зарубежье*), yet has promoted the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). This *Eurasian integration* scheme aims to position Russia as the central power in a region framed as *Eurasia* through a regional integration scheme encompassing countries that were part of the Soviet Union (Vasilyeva, 2015). The increased (geo)political competition between the EU and Russia has transformed the concept of a *shared* neighbourhood into a *contested* one. However, whether *shared* or *contested*, the notion of *neighbourhood* reflects a centre-periphery approach, often overlooking the agency of the countries involved. This underscores the need to rethink regional integration schemes, adding to the complexity of the *two halves Europe*—one with long-standing EU member states and the *new states* that joined in 2007 and 2013 (Valášek, 2019).

Discussion and Conclusion

Given the variety and richness of regional processes, it is hard to claim to have a universal theory explaining the multiple characteristics of regionalisms around the world (Acharya, 2016). As Cox (1981) points out, every theory is for someone and some specific purpose. Theories emerge from a given context to explain facts that arose under particular conditions; therefore, the origin of the theory greatly influences how reality is interpreted and perceived. In the case of regionalism, attempting to universalise the theoretical perspective surrounding the European Union implies omitting the hostile and violent context that gave rise to the regional process. It is worth remembering that European regionalism largely emerged as a mechanism to curb violence and confrontation within the European continent, a unique situation that finds no comparison in any other region (Vivares et al., 2014).

Omitting the particular characteristics of each theory and using them as a universal model to understand processes in other contexts ends up generating conceptual prisons, which generate major problems when it comes to understanding regional processes.

In sum, adopting a decentered perspective on regionalism in Eastern Europe requires addressing three critical conceptual cages: the tendency to assess progress through the lens of Western Europe's conditionalities for EU integration, the contested perception of Eastern Europe as a buffer zone between the EU and Russia, and the dominance of hegemonic regionalism that privileges state boundaries while overlooking alternative, transnational forms of regionalism.

In the case of South America, the conceptual prison of the European Union has generated several inconveniences. First, the invisibilisation of voices and perspectives that seek to understand South American regionalism outside the dominant visions. Second, conceptual prisons hide the variety of factors that influence South American regionalism. Hegemonic themes such as trade and supra-nationality have omitted fundamental issues such as identity, the participation of Indigenous peoples, and solidarity within the regional process. Finally, conceptual prisons also affect the research process by limiting methodological possibilities. The dominant theories do not offer the ontological scope to understand dynamics outside the realist and liberal visions, making it difficult to understand other aspects (Vivares, 2023). In a diverse and constantly changing world, it is important to assume a decentralised position of knowledge that allows understanding of regionalisms at a global level, starting from their characteristics.

We thus echo the call to approach Western Europe not as a universal benchmark but as one of many local histories and contexts, therefore provincialising rather than universalising Europe. We acknowledge the challenge to rethink regionalism from this lens as it entails a certain level of homogenisation, yet we argue that in both South America and the East of Europe, regionalism has been too often thought from (normative) hegemons such as the EU, Russia, and the United States. Consequently, a *toolbox* to first conceive and then implement a regional integration scheme should be

equipped with Indigenous knowledge, moving away from extractivist and capitalist regional integration schemes.

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Essay 53: *Arriba, Abajo, al Centro y Adentro*: A Multilevel Framework for Explaining Regionalisms



Bárbara Carvalho Neves and Karen dos Santos Honório

Introduction

Regionalisms are complex and multifaceted phenomena. The decontextualisation of theories in analytical applications to integration processes outside of Europe has resulted not only in a conceptual mismatch in the understanding of non-European processes but also in a fundamental tautological problem. This is because the European model has become the benchmark for determining whether a given regional association process can be considered regional integration based on its similarities or differences with the European process and its supranational characteristics (Briceño, 2018). The European model, while influential, is limited in its ability to explain regionalism in other parts of the world.

Besides, when trying to find a common toolbox for explaining regionalism worldwide, we have to go beyond comparative research, specifying each region's characteristics and structural elements that allow us to delve into the functioning, advancing and limiting sources of regionalism globally. For that, we can start by looking at the Latin and South American regionalism studies, which have encountered specific challenges in explaining the continuities and discontinuities over time. The various characterisations of South American regional processes and institutions often focus on what is happening during specific periods of regionalism's surge or decline. This

This chapter has been published with the financial support of the "Editais 205_2021 - Agenda Triplíce, 77_2022 - PAAP e 77_2022 - PAAP" from the Pro-Rectorate of Research and Graduate Programs (PRPPG) of the Federal University of Latin American Integration - UNILA.

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approach provides valuable insights into the immediate conditions and outcomes but falls short of addressing the underlying reasons and mechanisms behind these shifts.

Our work aims to fill this gap by delving into the why and how of these processes. By moving beyond the descriptive accounts of regionalism's ebbs and flows, we seek to understand the deeper dynamics that drive or hinder regionalism worldwide. This approach not only enhances our theoretical understanding of regionalism but also offers practical insights into the factors that promote or impede regionalism through time.

Thus, this essay aims to contribute to the study of regionalism by proposing a multilevel framework to analyse the complexities and nuances of such a phenomenon, starting with its application in South America. Titled *Arriba, abajo, al centro y adentro*—translated as “Above, below, to the centre and inside”—the framework encapsulates the multilayered interactions that influence regional processes and their outcomes through time.

Regionalism is characterised by its diverse and often fragmented nature, where multiple actors play crucial roles, ranging from national governments to regional organisations and international actors. The framework proposed in this study seeks to capture these diverse interactions by examining regionalism through three distinct but interconnected levels: the international (*arriba*), the regional (*abajo*) and the national (*al centro y adentro*).

At the national level, we highlight the importance of the role of domestic politics, including the influence of the Executive, Legislative and interest groups, in shaping each country's approach to regionalism. The regional level focuses on bringing light to the importance of regional institutions in their dual role as both actors and spaces for action. As actors, regional institutions have the capacity to shape and reinforce the commitments of states by meeting the expectations placed upon them. As spaces for action, regional institutions provide a continuous dialogue platform for cooperation and integration. Thus, regional institutions should not be overlooked when trying to explain the advancements and challenges of regionalism in the subcontinent. Finally, at the international level, we reinforce that the international system and external pressures play a significant role in shaping local and regional realities.

As an asymmetric and subordinate space within the international system, South America is particularly vulnerable to extra-regional pressures. When internalising these pressures, South American states trigger a reassessment of domestic policies, leading to changes in how domestic actors engage with regional processes, either positively or negatively. Such a dynamic must also be looked into in an interconnected way once the diversity of regionalist projects on the continent reflects the varying demands, preferences, and responses to external pressures among the different countries in the subcontinent.

Recognising the unique characteristics and interactions in each region, this essay seeks to advance the theoretical and empirical understanding of regionalisms by presenting a multilevel analytical framework, starting with its application in the South American regionalism case. This approach offers a holistic view of regionalism, acknowledging the complex interplay of various actors and levels of analysis that collectively impact the trajectory of regionalism in two parts: firstly, presenting a brief

historical characterisation of South American regionalisms, and secondly, presenting our proposal of a broader multilevel framework.

South American Regionalism: A Historical Characterisation

As highlighted by Briceño (2018), there is a long trajectory of integration ideas that are often ignored or undervalued in the literature on Latin American regionalism, which tends to consider the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) ideas as the starting point. The *a-historicism* noted by the author prompts a historical reconstruction of our regionalist processes, categorising experiences prior to 1950 merely as antecedents or, in the author's words, a proto-history of regionalism. The idea of formulating international policy strategies in a coordinated manner based on a shared conception of the region is at the core of 19th-century South American integrationist thought, with Simón Bolívar being one of its foremost representatives.

The harmful effects of Eurocentrism and Euro-empiricism in analysing South American regionalisms undermine these processes in two ways: (1) It disregards the pioneering ideas and initiatives forged since the nineteenth century in the region as theoretical contributions for analysing regionalism as a phenomenon in International Relations, invalidating them by using the European process as the empirical starting point of analysis, and (2) it disqualifies the conditions and specificities of South American regionalism precisely because they do not conform to Eurocentric standards.

The conceptual inadequacy of South American regionalisms, based on Eurocentric theories, led to a classification of initiatives in line with the historical framing of regionalism as a systemic-oriented process. This means that South American regionalisms have been interpreted and labelled merely as examples of the major phases of regionalism in world politics. According to Söderbaum (2015), regionalisms can be categorised into four major phases: (1) Proto-Regionalism, spanning from the late nineteenth century until the end of World War II; (2) Old Regionalism, covering the period from the late 1940s to 1980s; (3) New Regionalism, encompassing regional projects from the end of the Cold War within the context of the formation of the New International Order that began in the 1990s; and (4) Comparative Regionalism, referring to regionalisms in the early decades of the twenty-first century and the emergence of regionalist processes in different parts of the globe with varying meanings and objectives.

It is argued here that the use of global systematisation is not problematic in itself and that it contextually positions the development of South American regionalisms as an international phenomenon, highlighting the importance of systemic conditions for their understanding. However, in the case of non-European regionalisms, the historical framing combined with theoretical Eurocentrism has analytically simplified and homogenised their interpretation without giving due emphasis to the specific

analytical structures and concepts necessary for understanding their dynamics and actors.

The analytical consequences of this phenomenon can be observed in South American literature on regionalism through the profusion of statements that historically and contextually qualify regional processes, synthesised in the idea of *adjectivised regionalisms* according to Perrota and Porcelli (2019). The terms *closed regionalism* (1950–1980) and *open regionalism* (1990–2000) are used to classify the Latin American regionalisms that emerged before the 2000s. This academic practice gained strength mainly from the 1990s onwards; in this sense, we can highlight the concepts of post-liberal regionalism (Veiga & Rios, 2008; Sanahuja, 2008), post-hegemonic regionalism (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012) and liquid regionalism (Mariano et al., 2021) as important contributions.

The use of adjectivised regionalisms to characterise regional initiatives serves more to highlight the main driving ideas of each stage and the systemic drivers of regional proposals than to indicate an analytical framework that transcends the Euro-centric one to understand the theoretical specificities of these processes. The historical characterisation of South American regionalisms has made important contributions to positioning these processes within the international scenario and showing how the countries of the region translated external challenges into a regional basis.

The systematisation in phases or waves of regional contexts, however, does not mean that the characteristics of a given previous moment are completely replaced by the next one. This fact reinforces the importance of understanding the dynamics and actors that persist throughout the continuities and discontinuities of regionalisms understood by its phases (Honório & Mesquita, 2023; Neves, 2023).

Regionalisms should be understood in two complementary senses: (a) as *transmission channels* for what the external scenario imposes on the countries of the region, and (b) as possibilities/instruments for enhancing State capacities beyond borders. Here, regionalisms not only respond to external demands but are also guided by the domestic politics of national governments and their interests, becoming spaces for the regional projection of the countries' projects and objectives (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2018).

Based on this understanding, we propose a multilevel framework to analyse regionalisms around the globe, applying such a framework to complement historical approaches and highlight the analytical and conceptual specificities of South American regionalisms and their non-linear advancements and setbacks.

A Multilevel Framework: A Proposal

When examining the processes of impulse and retraction of regionalisms, certain characteristics persist and shape the dynamics around the globe. In the South American case, these include the centralisation of State power and the decision-making capacity and legitimacy concentrated in the Executive branches of South American countries, as well as the low decision-making autonomy of regional institutions.

However, these elements alone do not explain its resilience and functioning through time. To fully grasp these aspects, it is necessary to delve deeper into the various actors involved in the construction of the regional reality.

Building on this reflection, we propose a multilevel analytical framework that captures the different layers, actors, and processes involved in regional dynamics. This framework considers the interplay between national governments, regional institutions, and international actors, as well as the economic, political, and social dimensions that influence regionalism. By adopting a multi-level approach, we can better understand how these diverse elements interact and shape the development and resilience of regionalism over time (Neves, 2023).

This framework builds on the contributions of level studies by authors such as Singer (1961) and Putnam (1988), whose contributions to the studies of International Relations highlight the importance of two interdependent foundational levels—the national and the international. At the national level, the focus is on domestic disputes, actors, processes, and institutions that influence a country's foreign policy formulation, which in turn affects its stance towards the world and, for us, towards regional processes. At the international level, the emphasis is on the international system, analysing the global structure, external influences and preferences, and the positioning of countries within this dynamic, which influence their capacity to cope and/or socialise such pressures.

Despite these levels incorporating different aspects of international reality when analysing regionalism, it is essential to include a third level: the regional one. This level focuses on the institutional framework of regional processes. It examines the structures, norms, and mechanisms that govern regional interactions and collaborations, as well as the roles played by regional organisations and initiatives. By incorporating a third level, we intend to unveil the dynamics and complexities of regionalism in a broader landscape.

In this sense, we propose that to analyse regionalism comprehensively, it is essential to explore the distinct contributions of each analytical level: national, regional, and international. Each level provides a unique lens through which we can examine the complexities of regional dynamics.

The national level draws on Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) studies, such as the contributions of Allison and Halperin (1972) and Milner (1997), offering insights into domestic factors shaping a country's external behaviour. When inquiring about the actors involved in formulating a country's foreign policy on a given topic, as well as the determinants of each actor's interests, the national level offers a lens to unveil the domestic bargains in the region. Hence, understanding the preferences of domestic actors becomes crucial for grasping how States, through their foreign policy, interact with their neighbours and the regional institutions they have established. For that, we focus on three main domestic actors: the Executive, the Legislative and the interest groups.

Actors such as the Executive, Legislative, and interest groups have political preferences that reflect their own interests, which they seek to maximise within the national political dynamic. For political actors, the maximisation of their interests is closely tied to electoral cycles and their ability to remain in power through re-election. In

contrast, for social actors, maximising their interests is more related to optimising their economic gains, such as profits (Milner, 1997). Nonetheless, the preferences of these actors in a country's foreign policy are shaped by the competition among them at the national level, as well as their ability to influence the decision-making process. Additionally, it is important to note that the dominance of any particular actor in this dynamic can vary depending on the issue at hand, as interests and preferences shift according to the specific topic being negotiated (economic, infrastructure, financial, etc.).

By identifying these actors and their *modus operandi*, we gain a clearer understanding of South American regionalism, particularly through the lens of the institutional framework that allows for the integration of domestic preferences into the regional dynamic. We argue that national processes and conflicts continuously shape and reshape—through ongoing political evaluation—a country's approach to specific issues within regionalism. Therefore, it is the interaction among these actors within the political structures of each country in a specific region that determines how they engage in regional cooperation or focus their efforts on building regional institutions that reflect and protect national preferences.

The regional level benefits from comparative regionalism and institutionalism studies, focusing on the institutional aspects and interactions within the region. By including regional institutions as a level of analysis, we gain insight into crucial aspects of regionalism: the expectations of stakeholders within a regional framework and the institution's capacity to manage and meet these expectations over time, thereby ensuring its legitimacy and the commitment of its member countries. Thus, in addition to the national and international levels, our model integrates the regional level to examine these intrinsic factors within the structures and interactions that institutionally govern relationships between countries in the same region.

Institutions, “understood as the rules, norms, and practices that organise and constitute social relations, [... creates] constraints and opportunities for political action, in distributing political power, and in shaping political preferences over time” (Fioretos et al., 2016, p. 22). Based on such a definition, regional institutions can encourage and support subnational and intraregional coalitions by offering venues for dialogue and continuous, direct communication among arrangement participants. These institutions are vital in moulding the political landscape by facilitating collaboration and enhancing mutual understanding among member states and their diverse stakeholders.

By providing a venue for interaction, regional institutions can act as channels for the interests of the participating actors (reflecting the bargains and disputes at the national level), in a mutually shaping process that also limits and guides their perceptions. When actors place their expectations in these institutional structures, their views create demands on the institutions and other political and technical actors. This interaction shapes the efficacy and adaptability of regionalism.

Overall, and specifically in South America, regional processes tend to be driven by specific demands over time, resulting in the so-called *waves of regionalism*. South American regional institutions have historically reflected the prioritisation of the sovereignty and autonomy of individual States rather than fostering a more

autonomous and resilient regional space. This is also a reflection of their historical trajectories marked by colonialism and power disputes. These elements and factors, which characterise different periods of regionalism's momentum on the continent, are described by the historical institutionalism literature as critical antecedents.

Understood as structural characteristics of an institutional arrangement (Mariano et al., 2023), critical antecedents are important to be understood to the extent that they limit the choices of actors present in moments of possible change (critical junctures). When analysing regionalisms, its critical antecedents are the characteristics that shape the capacity of its institutions to respond to pressures, crises, changes and demands arising from new scenarios. Simultaneously, these antecedents contribute to the resilience of regionalism over time. Positively, they ensure continuity in regional processes, while negatively, they hinder the resolution of structural issues within these arrangements, impeding the achievement of established objectives.

When analysing the different *waves of regionalism* in South America, we can point out the main institutional configurations that hinder (in its absence) or promote (in its presence) the resilience of such arrangements through time: (1) the promotion of a continuous space for dialogue; (2) the legitimacy of the institution in promoting political agreement between the parties involved; and (3) an active leadership. A key feature of these institutions is the continuous provision of a dialogue space for states and involved actors. This ongoing forum for negotiation and bargaining helps shape and meet expectations, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of the institutions by aligning with the preferences of the states and actors involved (Neves, 2023).

In summary, at the regional level, we shed light on the institutional characteristics of regional mechanisms, which are crucial for understanding how these arrangements either constrain or propel regionalism over time. This analysis underscores the significance of institutional frameworks in shaping regional dynamics while also acknowledging that national factors within each domestic context play a critical role in influencing how individual countries position themselves within the regional landscape.

Lastly, the international level incorporates perspectives from the International Political Economy (IPE) and the Latin American IIPE, emphasising the broader global influences and economic relationships that impact regionalisms.

Given that regions and regional processes are not immune to external pressures (Hurrell, 1995), the international level underscores the importance of considering extra-regional actors and global political/economic dynamics as factors that impact and influence the other analytical levels. This means that to fully understand how regional and national dynamics unfold, it is crucial to recognise the role of external forces and how they shape interactions and decisions within regional and national contexts.

Through the lens of IPE and Latin American IPE, we reinforce the importance of understanding the international relations of each region, recognising their historical trajectories, including their economic structures and their positioning in the global economy. This perspective highlights that for countries such as those in Latin and South America, developing countries, regionalism can serve as a crucial tool for

defending their autonomy and achieving a more balanced international integration, allowing them to address external pressures and interests effectively.

The international pressures and preferences are internally processed by the State through its various institutions and actors, generating demands that lead to different national responses to these initial stimuli. Each country, with its unique capacities, navigates the inequalities of the regional system in its own way, resulting in a range of regionalist approaches that address these diverse and often asymmetrical challenges.

As previously noted, Latin and South American countries, being developing states, view regionalism as a means to better integrate into the international system. However, as external pressures on the region increase, the actors' perceptions of the costs and benefits of the regional arrangement may shift, leading to new demands on the State. In response, these countries might either seek closer ties with extra-regional actors or enhance their involvement in regional mechanisms.

The international level thus completes our analytical framework, where regionalism advances or retreats based on how national actors perceive the benefits of closer regional cooperation—economically, politically, and socially—compared to the benefits of not engaging. This perception reinforces the legitimacy of the institutional framework, as it encourages and sustains spaces for dialogue and negotiation among countries.

Conclusion

We propose to understand regionalisms as a non-linear process formed by national, regional, and international factors, actors and their preferences, which are intertwined and interdependent.

In our proposal, besides explaining why regionalism is progressing or facing limitations, our framework brings a multilevel analysis meant to explain how regionalism advances or is constrained. Summarizing, our framework states that regional processes, beyond comparative analysis, must be understood considering the following factors: (a) national actors' demand and their perception of the fulfilment of their expectations; (b) an institutional framework that supports consensus-building among participating actors; and (c) extra-regional pressures and its socialisation towards greater or lesser regional cohesion and convergence towards facing common goals and problems (Neves, 2023).

Given the specificities of a region in terms of national structure, institutional framework, and positioning within the international dynamic, our framework captures each process, actor, and interconnection present in the regional dynamic. This approach enables us to discern the varying degrees of influence these elements exert on the progress and/or decline of worldwide regionalism over time. By delving into these three levels, we can develop a holistic understanding of the forces driving regionalism and deepen the analysis of the factors driving both progress and setbacks around the globe.

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Essay 54: South America Region-Building Through Barry Buzan's Lens



Carmen Fonseca

Introduction

Regarding its historical roots and cultural heritage from European countries, such as Spain and Portugal, there is a trend to study Latin America through a European lens, concepts, and realities. This also applies to regionalist dynamics, such as the creation and evolution of regional institutions and governance (Mercosur, Unasur, Andean Community, etc.) and their relations with extra-regional powers or institutions. By focusing on the South American region and exploring alternative approaches, rather than relying solely on European integration theories, this essay seeks to offer a deeper and comprehensive understanding of the South American region and regionalism.

There is a tendency in some literature not to distinguish between South America and Latin America—sometimes South America is presented as a sub-region of Latin America, in other instances Latin American regionalism is defined in a way that actually confines it to South America (similar to the way Europe and the European Union are perceived).

How is a region defined through the dynamics of integration and cooperation? What criteria support this definition? In reality, there is a pattern to study regionalism without first defining or discussing the region in question, being it merely identified, resulting in a “vague conceptual framework that not only impacts the empirical and theoretical quality of the research but also hinders policymaking” (Van Langenhove, 2013, p. 476). Another trend is to define a region exclusively based on the Regional Organisation(s) that comprise it. The reflection presented here is not intended to contribute to the assessment of the Regional Organisations of South America, nor is it intended to analyse the leadership role or status of Brazil or any other state as a regional power. The objective is to reflect on the concept of South America as a

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region and its ongoing building process as a consequence of or a trigger for South American regionalism. By shifting the focus from merely territorial observation to including the ideas and practices involved in region-building, thereby assessing the level of regionness, this approach is expected to encourage the use of a comprehensive analysis in regionalism studies and lead to a more thorough understanding of South America.

When regional dynamics are studied in South America, they are usually framed by theoretical or conceptual lenses that were created to explain other parts of the world, namely Europe, and in particular, resorting to integration theories created to explain the European integration process. This is also true for South America since the historical roots between both regions are due to the colonial past, as well as because of the EU's strategy of creating regional institutions equivalent to itself. In the same sense, the success of the EU case has led both policy-makers and academics to see the EU as a model and a point of reference.

It is necessary to explore through what lens South American regionalism could be explained. Bearing in mind that a vacuum persists (or at least, a *lack of consensus*) about the concept of the region, this essay seeks to contribute to this debate by providing analytical elements that go beyond the European integration process and theories.

In the same vein, Acharya's concept of *multiplexity* will also be considered. It is presented as a broad approach to study and understand international actors beyond the European lens, because "a multiplex world is not defined by the hegemony of any single nation or idea;" it is a "world of interconnectedness and interdependence" (Acharya, 2017, p. 277). In that sense, I believe this analysis may contribute to the present South America (region) as a vivid illustration of a multiplex regional world, where globalisation, interdependence, and interconnectivity coexist with distinct ideas of autonomy and cooperation.

The analytical frame that will be proposed might be used to examine the origins of other regions that do not fit the European case of regional integration, namely the cases in which regions were not built from outside, the cases of regions that were not triggered by a previous regional organisation, or even the ones that are based on a previous common identity. In that sense, this essay will rescue Barry Buzan's model, which was designed for the study of the Asia Pacific (Buzan, 1998). No equivalence is assumed between the two regions, but some similarities can be identified, such as their composition by developing countries, the fact that they are not contiguous with Europe, their geographical proximity to Great Powers (China and the US) and their narrow relations with established powers (the US and some European countries). The analysis focuses on different types of interactions established among states to elucidate the processes defining (or allowing us to think of) South America as a region. Whereas Buzan had considered military, economic, and cultural interactions, it is relevant to include the political-ideological interactions, from a period of ideological convergence among South American countries in the early twenty-first century, to an ideological polarisation two decades later, when analysing the South American case.

Considering that the concept of region must go beyond physical and geographical borders, while still encompassing and integrating elements suggested by constructivists, and acknowledging that South America is connected to other regions (the Americas, Latin America, etc.) and that the political-diplomatic positioning and role of the (potential) regional leader (Brazil) is of relevance, I revisited Barry Buzan's question (*What sort of region?*) to conceptualise South America.

Based on his proposal, shared characteristics related to history, religion, language, geography, and forms of government will be identified and analysed. Also, interaction patterns that distinguish South America from other parts of the world will be examined based on security, economic, cultural, and political-ideological interactions promoting cooperative and/or integrative attitudes and defining the region's boundaries. The common perceptions, whether coinciding or not, among members interpreting the region based on actual interaction patterns, will also be considered.

Paradoxically, shared characteristics among its constituent countries may be the greatest obstacle to South American regionness. There is undeniable ongoing region-building, both through the pattern of interactions extending beyond economic and security components and through discourse about the region. However, it does not yet project a consolidated identity, although its organisations are externally seen as representatives of a regional space.

Shared Characteristics

The first element proposed by Buzan refers to the shared characteristics of the states within a region, that is, is there regional coherence in South America? The ideational framework of South America becomes even more complex given how each of its units perceived, rescued, and incorporated it into their practices over time. Using Buzan's term, the Latin American historical roots of South America influence its *integrative interactions*.

The existence of a common colonial past, almost everywhere except Brazil, is a shared experience that somewhat explains the shared understanding regarding the importance of state sovereignty, and consequently, the unwillingness to transfer it, focusing instead on preserving national autonomy. The post-independence paths, as well as the visions of the region itself and strategies for international integration, were distinct. In effect, the post-independence views and perceptions persist in each of the countries and hinder a deeper cultural sharing, which is often regarded as an element that confers homogeneity to the region. Pastrana and Castro (2015) highlight the contradiction of Latin American regional ideas—the Americas, Pan-Americanism, and Latin America itself—because the idea of Pan-Americanism was a North American proposal, while the notion of Latin America aimed to emphasise that the greatest threat lay in the USA rather than Europe.

As it becomes clear, these projects were characterised by a weak conception of statehood (*stateness*) and divergent concepts of the region, which reinforced the difficulty of relinquishing sovereignty (Pastrana & Castro, 2015). This may be related

to the historical experiences in the construction of many Latin American nation-states, especially their weak statehood, which led them to focus on consolidating sovereignty through the process of regionalisation rather than its transfer. Thus, the argument developed that regionalism “remains a matter for Presidents” (Malamud, 2022, pp. 237, 244).

Such elements led to the emergence of *selfish interests and identity*, where rejection of the other, represented by the USA, became a constant and the most widely shared characteristic by all. As Mesquita (2016) points out, the USA was an “effective common other,” where, for example, coordination among Mercosur countries was “one of the best expressions of a ‘we’ sentiment in the region, to date” (Mesquita, 2016, p. 18).

Patterned Interactions

The existence of a pattern of interactions is, for Buzan, what makes the analysis of a region interesting. The established interactions are “usually the key to identifying what distinguishes an international region from the rest of the international system” (Buzan, 1998, p. 70). The particularity of South America lies in the internal obstacles or challenges posed to existing interactions, given the emphasis on national dimensions and the reinforcement of national sovereignty. Looking at South America, how have the Andean Community and Mercosur, or Unasur and the Pacific Alliance, contributed to the regionness of the region? What are the underlying attitudes and the intensity of interaction fostered by these organisations? Is the degree of interdependence created sufficiently intense to establish regionness?

The pattern of established interactions allows defining the region’s boundaries, with most regions rarely approaching an *autonomous or self-sufficient* type. Buzan suggests analysing the existence and role of *intrusive powers* in establishing and maintaining the region’s borders, although their presence does not necessarily imply belonging to that region (Buzan, 1998, pp. 72–73). In the case of South America, although historically there has been a predominance of European or North American presence in the region, the advent of the twenty-first century brought a new power to the region—China, which has reshaped South America’s interactions.

Military Interaction

In South America, military interactions between states are highly constrained, with situations of increased tension, such as the recent case between Venezuela and Guyana, only sporadically emerging. Despite rising military expenditures over the past decade, these do not represent a destabilising factor (Vaz, 2013). On the other hand, the proliferation of non-state and transnational actors threatens the functioning

of the state itself and contributes to insecurity in societies—examples include criminal networks and drug trafficking, which have gained new dimensions and greater prominence in recent years.

Based on the three types of attitudes presented by Buzan (regional security complexes, security regimes, or pluralistic security communities), it is possible to classify South America as a pluralistic security community, given that states do not prepare to use force in their relations with each other. According to Deutsch, a pluralistic security community refers to “a quality of relations among states that have the certainty that the members of a community will not fight physically against each other but will settle disputes in other ways” (Deutsch, 1979).

In this sense, regional defence cooperation, manifested in the creation of the South American Defence Council, was an innovation in South America, although it is seen as a giant with feet of clay due to the existing strategic culture (or the lack thereof). Consequently, as some studies demonstrate, the absence of regional leadership in this area has led to the weakening of regional cooperation.

Economical Interaction

Despite theoretically asserting that neighbouring countries tend to trade more with each other out of convenience, China's entry into South America (and the whole of Latin America) has contradicted this pattern. Unlike the European experience, where economic interests and civil society transferred to the region and pressured sovereignty collectivisation, South America witnessed a defensive process in which “regionalism functioned as a protectionist tool for globally non-competitive industries” (Burges, 2005).

Thus, what is observed in South America is that trade with China and the United States has become much more important than trade with neighbouring countries. Until 2015, trade between Brazil and Argentina decreased both in relative and absolute terms, with Brazil no longer being Argentina's leading trading partner, replaced by China.

Unlike the European experience, where economic interests and civil society shifted towards the region and pushed for “collectivisation of sovereignty,” in South America, a defensive process unfolded where “regionalism functioned as a protectionist tool for industries that were not globally competitive” (Burges, 2005, p. 439). It was believed that “expanding trade would necessarily bring economic growth,” however, as the crises that Mercosur went through demonstrated, integration “remained a presidential political imperative that internally seems to lack substantial economic and political demand” (Burges, 2005, p. 440).

Even some efforts translated into cooperation mechanisms aiming at economic and commercial integration—such as the Andean Community (CAN), the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), and the Pacific Alliance (AP)—contemporary literature reinforces the idea that “South American integration was not driven by economic

cooperation, but by the search in the energy sector accompanied by Brazil's leadership ambitions" (Borges, 2015). This argument helps to understand the fragility of some of these regional mechanisms.

Cultural Interaction

It is assumed that the regional processes labelled as post-liberal, or post-hegemonic regionalism, added a social dimension to such processes. For instance, regional organisations have *redefined or incorporated* the issue of migration into their objectives. Aside from forced displacements and migrations due to refuge, the choice of regional destinations is influenced by the good socioeconomic indicators of the destination countries and benefits from "policies and regional agreements such as the Mercosur Residence Agreement" (Villarreal, 2018, p. 137).

Mercosur incorporated this political and social component with the Ouro Preto Protocol of 1994, and since then, several agreements have been implemented. However, assessments of the social dimension of Mercosur are not positive, and they are characterised by limited transparency and implementation. CAN, especially since the 1990s, has implemented legal mechanisms. Since then, various legal mechanisms have been implemented with the aim of "facilitating the transit and residence of citizens in the Andean sub-region" (Villarreal, 2018, p. 137). On the other hand, Unasur is the only organisation that has had politics and social issues at the core of regional cooperation from the outset, aiming to contribute to a South American identity. Just like Mercosur, the South American Citizenship Working Group also launched an Action Plan (Villarreal, 2018, p. 137).

The evolution registered in some South American countries regarding migration policies led Domenech (2017, p. 20) to refer to them as the "South American exceptionalism", highlighting the potential for a "Latin American migration regime of the twenty-first century." Such transformations include universal citizenship, eliminating visas in Ecuador, recognising migration as a right in Argentina, and implementing regulations and laws to ensure migrant rights in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Uruguay (Domenech, 2017).

Political-Ideological Interaction

South American political reality of the last two decades—marked by a strong convergence consequence of the leftward turn (*pink tide*) in the early twenty-first century—obliges us to analyse the political-ideological interaction among states. This interaction can be perceived as a dependent variable in the region's construction and an intervening variable in other factors due to its influence on other types of interactions.

Unasur presents itself as an "innovation" in the regionalist landscape of South America (Briceño-Ruiz & Hoffmann, 2015, p. 49) because (i) it does not have

economic and commercial integration as its guiding core; (ii) it included the topic of defence in the common agenda; and (iii) it failed to withstand crises, ultimately failing. It also proved innovative in proposing to articulate political cooperation and interaction with “the preservation of states’ autonomy, the promotion of economic and social development, and the construction of a regional identity” (Mariano et al., 2014, p. 132). In this sense, the institutional design was quite flexible, “based on consensus and dialogue” (Comini, 2015).

On one hand, Unasur has been described as the trigger for the wave of post-liberal regionalism in the South American region, positioning South America as a guiding axis “in opposition to the traditional symbolic references of Latin America” (Cienfuegos & Sanahuja, 2010).

On the other hand, the end of Unasur contradicted the region’s pattern, making it “an exception in the history of Latin American regionalism, as it is the only crisis that resulted in the end of the regional organisation” (Agostinis & Nolte, 2023, p. 136). Despite this outcome, the creation of Unasur in 2008 spurred academic production on the relationship between regional cooperation and political ideology. The *pink tide* in many South American countries and the resulting ideological convergence are often cited as the cause for the outcomes achieved in the region, including the strengthening of regionalism.

The literature does not universally agree on these outcomes; that is, ideological convergence may be a necessary variable but not sufficient to deepen regionalism. For example, Quiliconi and Rivera (2019) concluded that ideological convergence led to the creation of numerous organisations, rather than fostering a deep regionalist process. Nevertheless, various case studies have shown that ideological convergence enhances the intensity of interactions and the regionness of South America (Luciano & Mesquita, 2023).

Shared Perception

In addition to the inherent potential of shared ideals and characteristics, South America is being built from inside—the Argentina-Brazil bilateral relationship, Brazil’s desire to create a regional space distinct from Latin America, as well as Venezuela’s priorities under Chavez (although they differed from others).

South America allowed Brazil to be identified as a region that more directly responded to its foreign policy objectives while also differentiating itself from certain Latin American principles and ideals. However, in practice, the evolution was fraught, as Chávez’s Venezuela had a distinct vision of regional architecture and claimed leadership over this new region. Likewise, over the years, Brazil also struggled to influence its neighbours to join in pursuing certain national or regional goals, especially if they did not see a direct benefit in doing so. This difficulty was related to a *suspicious attitude* (Mesquita, 2016) and distrust, typical among countries in Latin America and South America, which would have consequences for the creation of a South American regional identity.

For reasons different from Brazil, Chile has also developed an ambivalent feeling towards South America and a narrative based on the belief of being “a unique country” (Wehner, 2020, p. 560), creating a “moderately misplaced regional identity,” meaning “a cognitive dissonance between its geographical location and its sense of place” (Wehner, 2020). Its actions in the regional security agenda within the framework of Unasur, and the creation of regional institutions such as the Pacific Alliance or Prosul, are seen as efforts to diminish this sense of *misplacement*.

Thus, there was a convergence of leftist values that provided a bond among governments, despite the prominence of rhetoric and weak results. In contrast, even if weak institutionalisation is not a hindrance to building a regional consciousness, “a sense of *we* in civil society can contribute to *regionness*” (Mesquita, 2016, p. 12), which is also absent. In this sense, states tend to act on a utilitarian basis rather than with a perspective of shared identity and goals (Bueno et al., 2013; Burges, 2015).

Initially, Mercosur, focusing on economic and trade cooperation, and then UNASUR, developing as a political-social forum, were two crucial interactions in the attempt to delimit, institutionalise, and give identity to a new region—South America. In the early twenty-first century, UNASUR, but also ALBA, presented new and different understandings of social cohesion and regional identity. Despite not seeking the transfer of sovereignty, they attempted “to promote the necessary political coordination to build effective regional governance” (Pastrana & Castro, 2015, p. 540)—mechanisms that, however, would eventually fail.

Conclusion

The interactions observed in South America reveal that implicitly, the primary goal of states is to ensure sovereignty rather than achieve regional integration. Ideological alignment may therefore benefit South America’s sense of regionness. It is misleading to think that any interaction in South America aims at regional integration like that known in Europe. The pattern of interactions developed shows a cooperative attitude rather than competition, with (rhetorical) efforts towards integration rather than conflict. However, the intensity of cooperation is not matched by a corresponding intensity of institutional effectiveness. The weak institutional intensity stems from views on sovereignty, which reduce integrative attitudes and increase rhetoric, accompanied by a cooperative stance that can intensify when there is ideological convergence among the region’s governments.

Paradoxically, shared characteristics among its constituent countries may be the greatest obstacle to South American regionness. There is undeniable ongoing region-building, both through the pattern of interactions extending beyond economic and security components and through discourse about the region. However, it does not yet project a consolidated identity, although its organisations are externally seen as representatives of a regional space.

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