What's Wrong with Regional Integration?
The Problem of Eurocentrism

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Abstract

This working paper deals with one of the most pressing problems in the study and policy of regional integration: the problem of 'Eurocentrism', which in this context implies that assumptions and theories developed for the study of Europe crowd-out both more universally applicable frameworks and contextual understandings. In their frustrated attempts to avoid Eurocentrism, some scholars dealing with non-European regions tend to treat the Europe as an 'anti-model'—a practice which often results in a different form of parochialism where context is all that matters. The general ambition of this paper is to contribute to rethinking Eurocentrism and the role of Europe in comparative regional integration. More specifically, the study shows how Eurocentrism (in various guises) is detrimental to theoretical development, empirical analysis and policy debates, claiming instead that European integration should be integrated into a larger and more general discourse of comparative regionalism, built around general concepts and theories, but which is still culturally sensitive.

Keywords

Introduction

Over the last two decades there has been a literal explosion of academic research and policy discussion on regional integration and regionalism all over the world. Some of the most influential thinkers in the field emphasize that regions and regionalism are now central to global politics. For instance, Peter Katzenstein rejects the 'purportedly stubborn persistence of the nation-state or the inevitable march of globalization', arguing that we are approaching a 'world of regions' (Katzenstein 2005: i). Amitav Acharya (2007) examines the 'emerging regional architecture of world politics'. Yet, the approach of different academic specializations varies considerably, and 'regional integration' means different things to different people in different contexts. Indeed, the research field is extremely fragmented, with a lack of dialogue between academic disciplines and theoretical traditions, and contestations arise about the meaning of regional integration, its causes and effects, how it should be studied, what to compare and how, and not the least what are the costs and benefits of regional integration. The policy debate is also inconclusive, at best.

This paper deals with one of the most contentious issues in the debates about regionalism and regional integration, namely Eurocentrism and the question how to deal with and relate to European integration theory and praxis. Somewhat simplified, there are two contrasting attitudes towards European integration in the debate about regional integration. The first and by far most dominant perspective is to treat European integration as the foundation for conceptual development, theory-building and comparison. This perspective easily becomes 'Eurocentric' and a 'false universalism', whereby European integration in general and the EU in particular becomes the marker, model and paradigm from which to theorize, compare and design institution as well as policy in the rest of the world. Whereas mainstream discourses about regional integration is more or less built around European integration theory and practice, a smaller and rather diverse cohort of scholars and practioners, focusing on non-European regionalism, has deliberately tried to avoid and challenge Eurocentrism. From this perspective, European integration is (deliberately or indeliberately) treated as an 'anti-model'. Although the effort to avoid the pitfalls of Eurocentrism is commendable, this perspective often results in an 'inverted Eurocentrism' (whereby theory and practice, by definition, must be 'different' compared to Europe) or a different form of parochialism (whereby context is all that matters).

The point of departure of this paper is that any serious reflection on regionalism and regional integration must necessarily relate to and define a stance towards the most widely discussed case of regionalism (i.e. European integration). The main argument of the paper is that we need to avoid Eurocentrism as well as anti-Eurocentrism, and instead move towards a non-Eurocentric discourse of comparative regionalism, built around general concepts and theories, but which is still culturally sensitive. The study will describe how Eurocentrism (in various guises) negatively affects both theoretical development, empirical analysis and policy debates as well as offer some ways to rethink regionalism and regional integration. The next section elaborates what are the problems and possible solutions to Eurocentrism in regional integration studies and policy. The second and lengthier section argues that the extreme focus in both academia and policy on interstate regional organizations often follows from Eurocentric assumptions. The empirical illustrations of Asia and Africa are used as means to show how regional integration can be rethought in this regard. A conclusion rounds up the paper.

Transcending Eurocentrism and Parochialism

After World War II the study of regional integration was dominated by an empirical focus on Europe. During the era of such early regionalism, European integration theories were developed for and from the European experience and then, gradually, more or less re-applied or exported around the world.

Although the neofunctionalists were somewhat conscious of their own Eurocentrism, in their comparative analyses they searched for those 'background conditions' and 'spill-over' effects that could be found in Europe (Haas 1961; Hettne 2003). All too often (but not always) the European Community was seen and advocated as *the* model, and other looser and informal modes of regionalism were, wherever they appeared, characterized as 'weaker' or 'failed'. There are some good and more or less legitimate reasons why these notions developed, especially that there were relatively few other cases to theorize from at the time.

Different types of Eurocentric generalizations continue to influence and shape the research field. To some extent, Eurocentrism has worsened compared to the early debate as a result of the consolidation of the EU. European integration in general, and today's EU in particular, has become a marker, a model and a paradigm from which to theorize, compare and design institution as well as policy in most other regions of the world. In the past as well as currently, non-European cases and experiences are usually considered a-typical, unique, or do not constitute 'the real thing', according to the orthodox definition of 'regional integration' (Schmitter & Kim 2008: 23). That is, most of the main concepts and the most widely discussed (mainstream) theories are all derived from a *particular* reading of the case of Europe. Hence, from the Europe-centred viewpoint, European integration is usually considered multidimensional, sophisticated and highly institutionalized—both a descriptive and prescriptive contention—whereas regionalism/regional integration in the rest of the world is seen as only weakly developed, weakly institutionalized and usually reduced to either and economic or security-related phenomenon (or as an instance of 'regional cooperation') (Christiansen 2001). These prescriptions have resulted in that few concepts and theories generated from the study of non-European regions have been able to influence the way we study and conceive European integration. This has limited our understanding of European integration itself, but it has also prevented the development of more general conceptual and theoretical toolboxes.

The Eurocentric bias lies in the ways the underlying assumptions and understandings about the nature of regionalism (which most often stem from a *particular* reading of European integration) condition perceptions about how regionalism in other parts of the world does (and should) look (i.e. heavy emphasis is placed on the economic and political trajectory of the EC/EU). Several realist or intergovernmental and liberal or institutionalist approaches belong to this perspective, and often these theories are dominated by a concern to explain deviations from the 'standard' European case. Indeed, anyone engaging with literature and policy on regional integration will detect that most other cases of regionalisms are compared — implicitly or explicitly — against the backdrop of European theory and practice. From such (Eurocentric) perspective, other modes of regionalism/regional integration are, where they appear, characterized as loose and informal (such as Asia) or as failed (such as Africa), reflecting 'a teleological prejudice informed by the assumption that 'progress' in regional organization is defined in terms of EU-style institutionalization' (Breslin *et al* 2002: 11). As Hurrell (2005: 39) asserts, 'the study of comparative regionalism has been hindered by so-called theories of regionalism which turn out to be little more than the translation of a particular set of European experiences into a more abstract theoretical language'. This can be thought of as a 'false universalism' and it tends to show a lack of sensitivity to other regions which occupy unequal positions in the world order and consisting of radically different state forms (Söderbaum & Sbragia 2010).

From Eurocentrism to Parochialism

Whereas a great deal of *mainstream* literature on non-European regionalism has favoured generalizations from the case of EU in their theory-building efforts, a number of scholars have tried to avoid and challenge Eurocentrism. There exist numerous innovative and rather successful attempts to develop a regional approach, quite often specifically aimed at the developing world (Axline 1994a; Bach 1999; Bøås *et al* 2005).

Many of the earlier attempts (in 1960s, 1970s and even 1980s) to develop the theory and practice of regionalism in the developing world can be understood within the structuralist tradition of economic development, pioneered by Gunnar Myrdal, Arthur Lewis, and Raul Prebisch. From this perspective the rationale of regional cooperation and integration among less developed countries was not to be found in functional cooperation or marginal economic change within the existing structure, but rather, through the fostering of 'structural transformation' and the stimulation of productive capacities, whereby investment and trading opportunities were being created. This school thus shifted focus away from economic integration as a means of political unification (the preferred European explanation) to one of regional economic cooperation/integration as a means of economic development. Hence the dependent variable ('regional integration'), as well as the underlying conditions were so different compared to Europe that it, according to its proponents, called for a different theory (Axline 1994b: 180). Even if not completely gone, there is currently little genuine discussion about 'structuralism', regional protectionism or regional delinking, implying a greater convergence between European and non-European regionalisms in this regard.

In the current debate scholars and policy makers favouring a particular theory for regionalism in the developing world (or outside Europe) tend to do so because the different contexts and political logics compared to Europe. More often than not, they also tend to believe that regional integration can be tailor made to suit specific national and regional realities and contexts. Two methodological points can be made in this regard. The first is that the attempt to avoid Eurocentrism and 'false universalism' is applaudable. Hence, there are good reasons for taking stock of this cumulative research on non-European regions and for being somewhat cautious regarding EU-style institutionalization dominating mainstream theory and policy. The second methodological reflection is that large parts of this scholarship tend to 'mirror' the Eurocentric view by taking the EU as an 'anti-model' and by celebrating the differences in theory and practice between regionalism in Europe and the developing world. This can be thought of as 'inverted Eurocentrism', or at least a different form of parochialism.

There are many overlapping reasons for the scepticism of this school to engage with European integration. What ought to be important is whether cases are comparable or not, and whether new knowledge can be gained from integrating cases in the same framework, or at least engaging in some type of dialogue between regional specializations. It is acceptable to claim that Europe and other regions are not 'comparable' and therefore require different concepts and frameworks. Indeed, comparing the EU with other forms of regionalism highlights the difficulty faced by scholars when moving across the divide separating advanced industrial states from developing countries/emerging economies (Söderbaum & Sbragia 2010). Strong state institutions and structures matter in the shaping of both national and regional governance; so does national wealth. However, the main problem with avoiding European integration is that the issue of comparability is quite seldom seriously reflected upon from a methodological perspective. It appears that the discussion is sometimes influenced by ideology, emotions, lack of interest or other artificial arguments. As pointed out by Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond (2010), many scholars who want to avoid the case of Europe have made a caricature of the EU or classical regional integration theory, especially of neofunctionalism, which is claimed to be grossly misunderstood. This has resulted in a failure to learn from European integration theory and practice, giving rise to unnecessary fragmentation within the research field. A similar argument could in fact be made regarding scholars of European integration, who often tend to make caricatures of regionalism in the rest of the world.

The fragmentation in the study and practice of regional integration (including the failure to engage with the European case) is tightly connected to dominance of regional specialization. Elsewhere I have explored the tension between regional specialization and comparative research in the field (Söderbaum 2009). At least empirically, most scholars specialize in a particular region, which they often consider 'special' or 'unique'. There are many reasons for regional specialization, some which are more persuasive than others. One set of reasons include the difficulty to have competence and knowledge of more than one region. Another set of reasons include time and the resources to carry out research in

more than one region. However, one evident risk with exaggerated specialization is that it easily leads to neglecting other cases or general theory. In worst case, it may even constitute a breeding ground for parochialism.

Needless to say, specialization and case studies are by themselves not a methodological or scientific problem. On the contrary, some of the most informative studies in the field of regional integration are case studies or studies situated in debates within a particular region, such as Europe, East Asia, the Americas, or Africa (Söderbaum 2009). To avoid any misunderstanding, detailed case studies of regionalism are certainly necessary; these identify historical and contextual specificities and allow for a detailed and 'intensive' analysis of a single case (according to mono-, multi- or interdisciplinary studies). They may also be crucial instruments for theory-testing of different sorts. However, the main methodological disadvantage of case studies is, however, that a single case is a weak base for creating new generalization or invalidating existing generalizations (Axline 1994c: 15).

Too often, however, regional specialization tends to lead scholars to develop conceptual toolboxes and theories that are developed from/for their own 'region', without really trying to engage other cases or competing discourses. Such parochialism prevents the development of a more general and universal discourse. It prevents scholars from recognizing that they may be analyzing similar phenomena but with different languages and conceptualizations in different regions. One of the main arguments of this paper is that there is a need for a more integrated comparative debate about regional integration. Indeed, the next step in the study of regionalism is to develop its comparative element, which will be crucial for enhancing cross-fertilization between various theoretical standpoints and regional specializations. As correctly pointed out by Breslin and Higgott, 'when conducted properly, the comparative approach is an excellent tool … it is a key mechanism for bringing area studies and disciplinary studies together, and enhancing both. It provides new ways of thinking about the case studies whilst at the same time allowing for the theories to be tested, adapted and advanced' (Breslin & Higgott 2000: 341).

European Integration and Comparative Regionalism

The current relationship between European/EU studies and comparative regionalism is somewhat special and deserves a particular mentioning. It is clear that large parts of the more recent EU studies community have considered the EU as a nascent, if unconventional, polity in its own right ('the famous n=1 problem'), exploring issues such as Europeanization and the EU's own political system. This perspective has generated useful insights, but as Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond (2010) assert, it has also carried a certain intellectual parochialism and thereby kept us from deepening our understanding of the EU as a political system. Further, it has reinforced the notion that the EU is *sui generis,* thereby down-playing the respects in which the EU resembles other federalist or regionalist projects around the world. This is a similar type of parochialism that characterizing other forms of regional and area studies specializations. What makes EU studies somewhat special is that whereas other regional specializations have little or no negative influence on comparative debates, the concepts, frameworks and research results of EU studies are often exported to other regions. Such export may not constitute a problem, but it becomes much more controversial since there is no cross-fertilization and since it reinforces the problems associated with Eurocentrism.

Since the mid-1990s there is a rather important trend in the EU studies community whereby the EU is explicitly compared with federal systems in advanced industrial states, with the United States playing a prominent role in such comparisons (Hix 1994; Fabbrini 2008). This has enabled scholars to transcend the n=1 problematique, but it has at the same time favoured a narrow perspective about (comparative and scientific) methods as well as cases, thereby widening the gap between EU studies and regionalisms in the rest of the world.

A completely different trend within EU studies in recent decades is that social constructivism has gained a more prominent place in the study of European integration (Christiansen *et al* 2001). This

line of thinking has entered the discussion on European integration mainly as a spill-over from the discipline of International Relations, and as a means of transcending the rather introverted debates between the mainstream theories of Europe/European integration. The social constructivist approach in the European debate emphasizes the mutual constitutiveness of structure and agency, and pays particular attention to the role of ideas, values, norms and identities in the social construction of Europe, which in turn draws away attention from the formality and particularities of the EU (Christiansen *et al* 2001). One unintended consequence is that it has facilitated comparisons and cross-fertilization with other regions. As Checkel points out, the differences between Europe and the rest of the world are overstated (even if some differences remain). According to Checkel: 'If not yet completely gone, then the days of *sui generis* arguments about Europe are numbered, which is very good news indeed' (Checkel 2007: 243).

Few can dispute that Europe as a region is diverse, it is very positive that there has been a corresponding explosion of interesting theorising on European integration in recent decades. Hence, there is no single EU mode of governance but a series of different interpretations of the EU (see Wiener & Diez 2009). There is good potential that this diversity will have a positive influence on comparative regionalism. Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond's (2010) injunction that scholars of regions other than the EU cannot afford to lock themselves away from the most advanced instance of regionalism in world politics (i.e. the EU) is important. But, as also emphasized by Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond (2010), there is need for a framework that can address the complexity of regionalism, and at the same time transcend the case of Europe/EU itself.

Beyond Sovereignty Transfer and Institutional Design

Historically the study of regional integration has focused heavily on sovereignty transfer and political unification within interstate regional organizations. This has resulted an uncountable number of studies on the EU and other state-led regional frameworks, such as the African Union (AU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Southern Common Market (Mercosur). This focus on interstate or supranational regional organizations is primarily rooted in Eurocentric theory-building as well as the 'problem-solving' ambition to determine what types of regions are the most functional, instrumental and efficient 'to rule' or govern. As a consequence of these two biases, regions have usually been taken as pre-given, defined in advance of research.

Even if classical theories of regional (European) integration and cooperation, such as functionalism and neofunctionalism, appreciated liberal-pluralist assumptions as well as cordial relations between states and non-state actors for the promotion of commerce, these early perspectives were subordinated to the analysis of what 'states' did in the pursuit of their so-called 'interests' as well as the consequences of state-society relations for supranational and intergovernmental regional organizations. This preference for regional organizations continues even in the current debate, and then increasingly framed in terms of 'institutional design' (Acharya & Johnston 2007).

The policy debate is plagued by idealism about the benefits of regional organization and more or less naïve assumptions about what they can realistically achieve. Hence, policy makers are heavily focused on supporting regional organization in Europe's image. Explicitly or implicitly influenced by functionalist and institutionalist theories and perspectives, policy makers believe that imitating EU's institutional structure is a way towards progress. This is seen in that most multi-purpose regional organizations in the rest of the world follow the EC/EU's institutional design (SADC, ECOWAS, AU, Mercosur, ASEAN etc.). But there are still no convincing scientific arguments why other regions would or should follow the historical integration path of EC/EU or its institutional structure.

This paper challenges the obsession with regional organizations in favour of a societal understanding of regional space. From this perspective, there are no 'natural' or 'given' regions (or regional organizations), but these are made and unmade—intentionally or unintentionally, endogenously or exogenously—by collective human action and identity formation. From this point of view, the puzzle is to understand and explain the process through which regions are coming into existence and are being consolidated—their 'becoming' so to speak—rather than a particular set of activities and flows within a pre-given, regional framework. In fact, regional organizations can be seen as surface phenomena compared to the underlying logic of regionalization and region-building. This is by no means equivalent to that scholars should cease focusing on regional organizations and 'institutional design', only that the overwhelming dominance of this focus has prevented alternative answers to how and why regions are formed and who are the relevant region-builders.

The heavy emphasis on state and global levels in mainstream international theory leads to a weak (even superficial) conceptualization of 'regional space.' Therefore, when the 'taken for granted' national scale/space is problematized, then other spaces and scales automatically receive more recognition. It needs saying that the rejection of 'methodological nationalism' is not equivalent of ignoring the state or national scale/space. On the contrary, states, 'countries' and interstate organizations are certainly crucial objects of analysis, though some analysts and approaches privilege them more than others. Clearly, it is important to continue to study 'states' and 'countries,' however defined. The point is rather that the political and institutional landscape is fundamentally being transformed, and needs to be rethought. There is a need to think in terms of more complex, multilevel political structures, in which the state is 'unbundled,' reorganized and assumes different functions and where non-state actors are also contributing (at various levels and scales). The methodological issue is to transcend the Western conceptions of the (unitary and Westphalian) state inherent in mainstream theorizing—be it neo-realism, institutionalist or liberal theory. In doing so, the view on offer here emphasizes the need to critically assess state-society complexes in the formation of regions and opens up for a broader understanding of what characterizes regionalism and regionalization in various parts of the world, and in a global perspective.

When different processes of regionalization in various fields and at various levels intensify and converge within the same geographical area, the cohesiveness and thereby the distinctiveness of the region in the making increases. The new regionalism approach (NRA) seeks to describe this multidimensional process of regionalization in terms of levels of 'regionness'; the process whereby a geographical area is transformed from a passive object to an active subject, capable of articulating the transnational interests of the emerging region (see Hettne & Söderbaum 2000; Hettne et al 1999-2001; Söderbaum 2004). Regionness means that a region can be a region 'more or less', and the level of regionness can both increase and decrease. The socially constructed nature of regions implies that they are politically contested, and there are nearly always a multitude of strategies and ideas about a particular region, which merge, mingle and clash. Furthermore, since regions are political and social projects, devised by human (state and non-state) actors in order to protect or transform existing structures, they may, just like other social projects, fail. Hence, regions can be disrupted from within and from without, sometimes by the same forces that build them up.

In what follows below the examples of East Asia and Africa are employed to illustrate what has gone wrong with the study and policy of regional integration (to a considerable extent due to the exaggerated Eurocentrism in the field) and to show how the various agencies of state, market and society actors can play out through both formal and informal regionalisms, in specific regional contexts (see Söderbaum 2009, 2011).

Formal and Informal Regionalism in East Asia

There exists no overall consensus for a definition of the Asian region. The meaning of regionalism has changed in relation to the question of what sub-regions should be included and excluded, what

dimensions of regionalism should be investigated (such as security, economics, politics and identity), and over the particular theoretical perspectives employed. Conventionally, Asia has been divided into Central Asia, Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia, with a blurred border towards the Middle East. Most literature in relation to regionalism has focused on East Asia, that is, Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. This diversity reveals the difficulty in taking the region as 'given' as well as the limitations of focusing on one particular regional organization.

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

During recent decades an important part of the debate about regionalism in East Asia has focused on collective identity formation and informal, or 'soft', regionalism (Acharya 2001; Katzenstein 2000). This scholarship seeks to account for the non-legalistic style of decision-making in this region, and the fact that there is no transfer of national sovereignty to a supranational authority (i.e. no 'regional integration' according to the orthodox definition). Nevertheless, there exists a dense network of informal gatherings, working groups and advisory groups, particularly within ASEAN, but also in the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), and more recently the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and ASEAN Plus Three/Four/Five (China, Japan and South Korea/India/Taiwan). This informal style of decision-making incorporates its own innate code of conduct that is often referred to as the 'ASEAN Way' (or 'soft institutionalism'), which, in contrast with European-style (and North American) formal bureaucratic structures and legalistic decision-making procedures, is built around discreetness, informality, pragmatism, consensus-building, and non-confrontational bargaining styles (Acharya 1997: 329). Further, the ASEAN Way reflects, to some extent, the illiberal underpinnings of the 'Asian values' construct, which stresses a communitarian ethic ('society over the self') in explaining the region's economic dynamism (Acharya 2001). This means that there is a considerable emphasis on cultural factors in explaining the Asian Way and its differences from Europe.

There exists a vigorous debate about the impact and efficiency of the informal and non-legalistic approach of Asian regional organizations (see Acharya and Johnston 2007). According to Higgott (2002: 2), the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s not only underlined the interdependence of Northeast and Southeast Asian countries, but also 'exposed the weakness of existing regional institutional economic arrangements'. To some observers, the financial crisis undermined confidence in the soft institutionalism of the ASEAN Way, and underscored the need for deeper institutionalization and stronger commitments from countries in the region. Following the region's recovery from the financial crisis, the East Asian countries moved to institutionalize annual leaders' summits and ministerial dialogues through the ASEAN+3 framework. The most concrete project is the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI), which was adopted in 2000 in order to provide emergency foreign currency liquidity support in the event of a future financial crisis. But broader cooperation also exists across a range of areas, such as small- and medium-scale industry development, human resource development, agriculture, tourism, and information technology (Nesudurai 2005: 167). Since then, a lot of attention has been devoted to various trade deals between ASEAN and other countries in the region (China, Japan, South Korea, India and Australia/New Zealand etc.) and an East Asian Free Trade Area (EAFTA).

Most research concerning East Asian regionalism is based on case studies rather than comparisons. There are nonetheless an increasing number of regional processes in East Asia, which provide a large base for comparison *within* the region. With regard to comparisons beyond East Asia, we are witnesssing an increasing number of loose comparisons with, or sweeping references to, European integration theories and practices. The great majority of such references or comparisons with Europe characterize East Asian regionalism as looser and more informal, sometimes even as 'underdeveloped' (Choi & Caporaso 2002: 485). Yet, hand in hand with increased knowledge of Asian regionalism, there is an increasing number of more nuanced comparisons (and explicit attempts to deal with the problem of Eurocentrism) (Fort & Douglas Webber 2006). As one of the leading scholars on East Asian regionalism, Amitav Acharya (2006: 312-3), correctly points out, rather than elevating the European model over the Asian experience as a preferred model of regionalism, it is more productive to recognize that regional cooperation is a difficult and contested process that will throw up different, equally legitimate, outcomes. When this proposition is built upon, there is good potential for cross-fertilization and comparisons in the study of European, East Asian, as well as other regionalisms.

Formal and Informal Regionalism in Africa

The majority of academics as well as policy analysts are rather idealistic about the potential of state-led regional cooperation and integration in Africa. Indeed, African regionalism is often seen as beneficial and an instrument for achieving socio-economic development and more recently also for security provision and good governance. Integral part of such idealism is the belief that the rather modest results achieved during the last five decades of regionalism in Africa can first and foremost be explained by unfavourable external conditions or a lack of institutional capacity to implement agreed policies (either within African organizations or on the national level).

Two partly overlapping schools of thought dominate the debate, and both tend to be more or less Eurocentric (but in different ways). The first line of thinking is the orthodox Eurocentric perspective. It is mainly associated with institutionalist and liberal lines of thought, and concentrates on formal interstate frameworks and/or official trade and investment flows, commonly with reference to the EC/EU as a comparative marker or model (Foroutan 1993; Holden 2001; Jenkins and Thomas 2001). What distinguishes the second, 'pan-African', school of thought is a set of synoptic overviews of African regional organizations and political-economic relationships, which are then coupled with demands for the strengthening of pan-African regional organizations and the so-called regional economic communities (RECs) of the envisioned African Economic Community (AEC) (Asante 1997; Muchie 2003). Both schools of thought are state-centric, and biased in favour of formal and state-led regional organizations, while largely neglecting underlying societal logic. It is particularly interesting to note that the pan-African line of thought often takes the EC/EU experience as inspiration, and as a justification for the development of pan-African regionalism. Indeed, despite their foundational differences, the two strands of thought make both implicit and explicit comparisons with the EU, and also come to similar conclusions. That is, notwithstanding the 'failure' of regionalism in Africa hitherto, according to these two perspectives, there is still great potential to build successful regionalism in the future.

The fundamental problem with these two optimistic perspectives is their Eurocentrism and that they crowd out less sanguine and less politically correct assessments. More critical (and sceptical) scholars, many who are loosely associated with the new regionalism approach (Grant & Söderbaum 2003; Hentz & Bøås 2003; Söderbaum 2004) claim that many ruling regimes and political leaders in Africa engage in symbolic and discursive activities—praising the goals of regionalism and regional organizations, signing cooperation treaties and agreements, and taking part in 'summitry regionalism'—while remaining uncommitted to, or unwilling to implement, jointly agreed policies. Regionalism is thus used as a discursive and image-boosting exercise: leaders demonstrate support and loyalty towards one another in order to raise the status, image and formal sovereignty of their often-authoritarian regimes, both domestically and internationally (Bøås 2003; Clapham 1996).

Rhetorical and symbolic diplomacy can of course be relevant, and the positive effects of the OAU, for instance, in the fight against colonialism and apartheid should not be ignored. Yet, the OAU's primary characteristic was not implementation of agreed policies, and a similar discursive logic has been institutionalized in many other regional organizations on the continent. Indeed, most political leaders in Africa frequently engage in symbolic and discursive activities, whereby they praise the goals of regionalism and regional organization, sign cooperation treaties and agreements, but with only sporadic implementation.

'Summitry' has become part of such discursive and symbolic regionalism. The summits of heads of states of the main intergovernmental regional organizations, such as AU, COMESA, ECOWAS and SADC, are gigantic events where the political leaders can show to the world and their citizenry that they are promoting the cause of African regional cooperation and at the same time show that their 'state' is important (or at least 'visible') on the international diplomatic scene. These summits and conferences are crucial elements in a discursive and even imaginary construction of regional organizations, and this social practice is then repeated and institutionalized at a large number of ministerial and other meetings, which in reality involves little debate and no wider consultation within or between member states.

The overlapping membership of regional organizations on the African continent has been debated for several decades. The seemingly ineffective overlap is often taken as an indicator of a poor political commitment to regional cooperation. However, considering that the overlap is such a distinctive feature of African regional organizations, surprisingly few scholars try to answer for what purpose and in whose interest the overlap actually prevails. Part of the answer may be that the maintenance of a large number of competing and overlapping intergovernmental regional organization is deliberate in order to increase the possibilities for rhetorical and discursive regionalism. One related hypothesis in need of further research is that weak political regimes are particularly prone to such behaviour and may search for as many arenas as possible to satisfy their quest for formal status and recognition.

Jeffrey Herbst correctly points out that 'African leaders are extremely enthusiastic about particular types of regional cooperation, especially those that highlight sovereignty, help secure national leaders, and ask little in return' (Herbst 2007: 144). Importantly, this logic should not necessarily be understood as a 'failure' of regional cooperation. From the point of view of the political leaders, such discursive practices can be a rational and well-calculated strategy of non-implementation. Those who idealistically (even naively) believe that regional institutions are designed in order to implement agreed goals and solve collective action dilemmas will fail to understand the underlying logic of such practices.

'Shadow regionalism' is another form of regionalism (which is sometimes linked to symbolic or regime-boosting regionalism). The concept of the 'shadow state' was developed by William Reno (1995) in order to refer to a particular type of state where corrupt politicians were sheltered by the formal façade of political power based upon informal markets. There is a strong transnational dimension of these informal activities, which can also enhance our understanding of informal regional activities. Building on Reno's concept, 'shadow regionalism' suggests that regime actors use their power positions within the state apparatus in order to erect a complex mode of regionalism, characterized by informality and a search for personal gain.

Shadow regionalism does not occur just everywhere, but tends to exist where patron-client relationships are the strongest. What is particularly disturbing is that it appears that even a small number of 'shadow agents' may block or even destroy egalitarian forms of development and regional organizations. Hence, shadow activities undermine the regulatory capacity of the state as well as regional organizations, and its promoters may actively seek to preserve existing boundary disparities (e.g. customs, monetary, fiscal and normative). Consequently, when political leaders resist formal regionalism, this may very well be a deliberate strategy to maintain the *status quo* in order to not disrupt shadow activities.

The profits involved in shadow networks are considerable and attempts to restrict shadow flows in Africa have often been unsuccessful, because agents are often able to adjust to new circumstances. In the current African context where the state apparatus itself offers less opportunity for private accumulation and where formal barriers between countries have been reduced, shadow regionalism stems no longer only from the exploitation of existing border disparities. Instead it has expanded to more criminal activities, such as new trades in illicit drugs, including heroin, mandrax and cocaine, arms, light weapons and other merchandise of war. Shadow networks may even be actively involved in the creation and promotion of war and conflict, as seen in the more turbulent parts of Africa, especially West Africa, Central Africa and the Great Lakes region.

By way of summing up, according to the dominant theories in the field, regionalism in Africa is often seen as weak, 'failed', or simply ignored. By contrast, as revealed by this review, there is significant evidence that regionalism in Africa is vibrant. In order to understand its logic we need to go beyond a particular reading of European integration and the associated exaggerated emphasis on formal and policy-led regionalism/regional integration. For similar reasons, we need to go beyond the related—yet false—Eurocentric assumption that there necessarily is a conflict between sovereignty and regionalism/regional integration. Regionalism in Africa is often used in order to boost national sovereignty or shadow interests.

Conclusion

Classical regional integration in the 1950s and 1960s was often shaped in accordance with the bipolar Cold War power structure. It was primarily driven through state-led policy frameworks and was generally specific with regard to objectives and content, often resulting in a specific focus on free trade arrangements and regional security alliances. Contemporary regionalism from the mid-1980s has to a large extent emerged in response to globalization. In contradistinction to classical 'regional integration' (i.e. the preferred concept in the old debate), which primarily took shape in Europe, contemporary regionalism is a more global but also more pluralistic phenomenon. The problem is that contemporary theorizing and conceptualization often fails to acknowledge the multiplicity and fluidity of regions and tends to repeat some old mistakes, especially Eurocentrism in various guises.

While doing comparative research, it is crucial to move beyond the 'false universalism' inherent in a selective reading of regionalism in the core, and in the EU in particular. As Hurrell (2005: 39) correctly asserts, rather than trying to understand other regions through the distorting mirror of Europe, it is better to think in general theoretical terms and in ways that draw both on traditional international relations theory, comparative politics and on other areas of social thought. This will only be possible if the case of Europe is *integrated* within a larger and more general discourse of comparative regionalism, built around general concepts and theories, but that remains culturally sensitive. In other words, the stance taken in this paper is that the barrier for achieving a nuanced comparative analysis is not the European integration experience or theory *per se*, but rather the dominance of *certain* constructions and models of European integration (Eurocentrism). Indeed, to neglect Europe is to miss the opportunity to take advantage of the richness and diversity of the EU project and laboratory (Warleigh-Lack & Rosamond 2010; cf. Wiener & Diez 2009).

The two empirical sections in this paper (Africa and Asia) have been used to illustrate the importance of non-European cases for theoretical development and innovation, with the added claim that this will be beneficial also for European integration theory. Although informal regionalism is by no means absent in EU studies, the intense link between formal and informal regionalism/regionalization in both Asia and Africa ought to have an impact on the way we conceptualize, theorize and compare regions. Indeed, African and Asian regionalisms show that one can, for instance, speak of relevant and truly regional dynamics and patterns that are not mirrored by formal state-led regional integration frameworks *per se*. The African and Asian cases also highlight

that it is important not only to inquire into the informality underpinning/accompanying formal regional projects, but also to take a broader perspective on formal-informal aspects of regionalism.

More specifically, even though symbolic regionalism in Africa appears to be tied to the supposedly specific characteristics of the African state and their insertion in the global order, it is difficult to deny that symbols, 'summitry', and other rhetorical and discursive practices appear strongly also in other regions both in the present era and throughout history. Indeed, the role of procedures, symbols, 'summitry', and other discursive practices of regionalism in Asia, Middle East, Europe, as well as North and Latin America suggest a very large potential for intriguing comparison and theory-development. For example, the Arab League is undoubtedly a project shaped and surrounded by rhetoric, perhaps even more than many African regional organizations. The Bolivarian project of regionalism pushed by Venezuela's President, Hugo Chavez, is first and foremost an anti-liberal and anti-American project. Even if there is 'implementation' and achievements in some specific sectors, such as oil, gas and health, the ideological and counter-hegemonic component is clearly its fundament. Likewise, it is difficult to dispute the fact that rhetoric and symbols played an important role in the Soviet-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. Discursive practices and symbolism have also played a prominent role in the EU. Historically, some EU member states have used Europe to legitimate their political regimes (mirroring the African pattern) while others have used Euro-scepticism for similar aims. Lastly, EU 'summitry' regionalism may possibly even outcompete the AU.

Finally, many scholars and policy makers tend to be overly optimistic about the potential of state-led regional cooperation and integration, and therefore often fail to ask critical questions about for whom and what purpose regional activities are carried out. The concept of 'shadow regionalism', derived from the African context, captures regional dynamics that, while keeping up universalistic appearances, mostly serve to uphold parallel and often informally institutionalized patterns of enrichment for a select group of stakeholders and their peers. Given that both patronage and informal markets exist all over the world, it needs to be emphasized that there is no reason to believe that shadow regionalism is restricted to Africa. The failure by regional integration scholars to discuss these and other clandestine effects (in Africa as well as other regions) result from a combination of Eurocentrism and idealistic notions about the benefits of regional organizations.

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