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Mainstreaming regionalism

Carlos Closa

European University Institute
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
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European University Institute

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Abstract

The consolidation of regionalism as a broad field of research attracting scholars across disciplines demands an inquiry on its scientific foundations. This inquiry should consider the object of research, the methods and the theories used. First, regionalism scholars lack a consensually agreed definition of their subject. Second, research focusses mainly in case studies, led by area specialists and comparative research is a rather occasional methodological occurrence. Finally, regionalism has not produced significant theoretical advances vis-à-vis neighbouring disciplines. In summary, regionalism contribution to knowledge is scarce and this paper suggests, instead, applying mainstream political science and international relations objects, methods and theories.

Keywords

Regionalism, comparative regional integration, concepts in social science.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

Introduction*

Comparative regional integration or comparative regionalism has become part of the global structural change (Farrell, et al., 2005) defining a *world of regions* (Katzenstein, 2005) (Acharya, 2007) (Sachs, 2011). Manifestations of the phenomenon can be found almost anywhere in the world - along with interested researchers - and a number of academic institutions have made this the subject of their research centres and units. Just some examples are: the UNU-CRIS; the Regional Integration Project at *Notre Europe*; Garnet VII FP Project; and the GGP Strand on Comparative Regional Integration at the EUI.

The growing salience of regionalism has prompted review articles aimed at mapping the "research field" - among others Väyrynen (2003), Tavares (2004), Sbragia (2008), Lombaerde et al. (2010), Behr & Jokela (2011), and Mansfield and Solingen (2010). These share several features. Firstly, even though the aim of bypassing Eurocentrism has fuelled discussions about regionalism, European scholars seem, paradoxically, to dominate debates both quantitatively and qualitatively. A number of scholars from the United States, Latin America and Asia participate, along with a few from Africa, but their stocktaking exercises constrain themselves primarily to US and European scholarship. Secondly, they refer almost exclusively to literature written in English - something that fits particularly badly with the eclectic claims behind new regionalism - and display a notable failure to acknowledge works written in other languages such as French, let alone Spanish and Portuguese. Thirdly, debates are highly self-referential: cross-referencing abounds between a relatively limited list of authors. Fourthly, debates, despite their claim to inter-disciplinarity, pivot on three sub-disciplines: international relations/international politics, international political economy, and area studies. Finally, most reviews examine the various topics at issue, but do not aim to discuss the scientific foundations of the field - although quite exceptionally, Lombaerde et al. (2010) focus on concepts, methods and theories.

This review looks precisely at the definition of regionalism and at the methodologies applied in researching it, from a critical standpoint. It claims that regionalism is a label for a field whose scientific specificity (i.e. the specificity of the phenomenon, the specific use of methods pertaining to this, and the value of specific theoretical constructions) remains to be proved. I will argue at the end of this article that the challenge for regionalism is that of mainstreaming itself - that is, using theories, concepts and methods of mainstream political science rather than constructing identity by kicking a corpse (i.e. integration theory).

1. A truly multidisciplinary field: economists, lawyers and political scientists

A number of disciplines converge around the notion of "regionalism". A conservative count would include the disciplines of economics, law and political science, while a more expansive one might also take in others such as geography. Moreover, a number of sub-disciplines within each main discipline also deal with regionalism and each of them bring their specific approaches. Among the political scientists touching on regionalism can be found area studies specialists, EU experts, and IR scholars (both rationalistic and constructivist). Some collaborative work across disciplines exists, but is not

* I am deeply indebted to Roberto Domínguez, Nicole Jenne and Andrés Malamud for their earlier comments on this paper. I also thank the participants in the PRIMO (Power and regions in a multipolar order) seminar held at the ICS-University of Lisbon on 30 January for a very suggestive session discussing the draft.

extensively practiced. Before turning to political science, we will first consider a brief summary of the positions of economics and law on regionalism.

Economists focus predominantly on the existence of economic flows and/or potential for economic flows, trade being the most important of these (*inter alia*, (Matthews, 2003; Lombaerde, et al., 2008). Political economists also share this understanding of integration/regionalism in terms of trade (Mansfield and Milner, 1997; Mansfield & Solingen, 2010). Economists also pay attention to supply and production chains integrating private firms, as well as more regulated processes involving free movement of services, capital and, sometimes labour - that is, the various ingredients of markets. Economic flows – and particularly trade - are not by nature bound to a given geographically contiguous area and hence, trade-based conceptions of regionalism release themselves from the constraints of depending on other, previous conceptions of region. The conception of integration/regionalism in terms of trade is deeply associated with the notion of “open regionalism”, and with discussions around the compatibility of regionalism with global trade.

Regionalism does not seem to pose a specific challenge for lawyers. Roughly speaking, the divide between international and domestic law remains a valid one, notwithstanding the porous nature of the boundary and the increasingly blurred distinction between the two. Only EU (i.e. Community) law has marked itself out as defying that dichotomy, in that the principles of direct effect, direct applicability and primacy bring it closer to federal law. Since formalisation is a characteristic of law, EU law can be compared to other formal models (from WTO law to other communities’ law, such as CAN or MERCOSUR). In parallel, scholars have identified a growing legalization (Abbott, et al., 2000), that is an increase in the formalisation of relations between states, leading some to speak of “global constitutionalism”. Lawyers do not unanimously accept the legalization paradigm, with some (e.g. Alvarez, 2007) criticising its inadequacy to explain developments in the Asian region, on the grounds that it does not pay attention to non-institutionalised and non-legalised activities. Looking at Preferential Trade Agreements (PTAs) variety of forms, Mansfield and Solingen (2010; 159) conclude that legalization has thus far been the anomaly, a signature feature of the EU. In this context, the issue for lawyers is not so much the characterisation of “regional law”, but rather whether and how it differs from public international law.

2. The object of research: concepts and their definition

Social sciences face a habitual problem: their objects of investigation are complex processes that are captured mainly through *definitions*. Concepts, which encapsulate these condensed definitions, thus become the main object of research in the social sciences (think of concepts such as sovereignty, democracy, legitimacy, etc.), and their definition is the arena for countless battles and theoretical disputes.

In a classic article, Sartori (1970) specified the logical rules for concept formation: any concept obtains meaning in the conjuncture of its connotation (i.e. the definitional traits that give specific meaning to a term) and denotation (i.e. the range of empirical phenomena to which a given concept applies). The relation between both is inversely proportional: increasing connotation (i.e. adding more precision to the meaning) decreases denotation, and vice versa. Sartori warned of several dangers in concept formation, not least “conceptual stretching” (i.e. expanding the scope of a concept to the point that it lacks any real meaning) and creating concepts with a polemical or ideological bias.

The twin concepts of “regional integration” and “regionalism” (and the associated terms “informal integration” and “regionalization/regionhood”) reflect neatly the dilemma contained in the logical rules. “Regional integration” emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s in economic thinking around the work of Tinbergen (1954) and Balassa (1961), although earlier conceptualizations had existed since the 1930s (Machlup, 1977). Even though the concept of “political integration” had had earlier uses, the promise of increased scientificity implicit in the economics-inspired new definition seduced

political scientists. They sought to increase the connotation of the concept referring to the scope (i.e. the areas covered) and level (i.e. the deepness in the transfer of authority) with the aim of “measuring” it. Such a thick connotation definition would permit empirical operationalization, thus contributing to the fulfilment of the scientific ambitions in question.

In parallel, scholars of regional integration opted for a shallower denotation. While they faced similar definitional problems as current scholars in the definition of “region” (Nye, 1968), (Russett, 1967), (Thompson, 1973), by and large they focussed rather more on “integration” (i.e. the process), and restricted their inquiries into existing formal integration organisations. Thus, Etzioni (1974) looked at the United Arab Republic (UAR), the Federation of the West Indies, the Nordic Association and the EEC, while Nye (1971) compared East Africa, the Arab League, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Haas and Schmitter (1964), on the other hand, analysed the European Economic Community (EEC) and the Central American Common Market (CACM). On the surface, attempts at theorisation seemed to benefit from the study of a significant number of organisations; in practice, however, the European case dominated as the basis for the most robust bids to build scientific theory around integration (e.g. neo functionalism). This brought about the question of theorization based on N=1 (i.e. theorisation based only on the European case) - the reaction to which is at the root of the turn towards pluralism inherent in the new regionalism approach. The failure of “scientific” theorisation derived from its inability to conclusively establish the dependent variable (i.e. integration) and the explanatory shortcomings of independent variables (Closa, 1994). Since integration could not scientifically be measured, but the existence of the EU was undeniable, mainstream political science sub-disciplines such as international relations, comparative politics, and public policy came to dominate the study of the EU - the fulcrum of this field of study now being displaced from integration towards “politics” and “policy”. Nowadays, most scholarly literature has retreated from the scientific use of the concept of “integration” in favour of “governance” or “multilevel system” instead - in doing so abandoning the “process” dimension inherent to it.

Regionalism, in turn, is not a new concept, since it was used in the 1960s and even before. Its current usage, however, emerges out of a conscious and explicit criticism of the hegemony of the EU - both as a normative and pragmatic model - and, more subtly, as an alternative scientific programme (Sbragia, 2008: 29; Söderbaum, 2013). The starting point lies in an alternative trade-off between concept denotation and connotation. On the one hand, definitions of regionalism are not very precise as far as attempts to dissect its meaning. Mansfield and Solingen (2010: 146) come closer to a traditional understanding when they argue that regionalism is usually understood to involve *policy coordination through formal institutions*, while Acharya (2012:3) defines it as purposive interaction, formal or informal, among states and non-state actors of a given area, in pursuit of shared external, domestic and transnational goals. These attempts of adding up different and even contradictory meanings of imbue regionalism with some degree of ambiguity and pluralism. Berh and Jokela (2011) propose five criteria for *classifying* regionalism: size, depth, functions, drivers and institutions.

Regionalism authors are more interested in increasing concept denotation - that is, the number of phenomena that it attempts to describe. Authors endorsing regionalism aim at transforming the empirical evidence extracted from non-European cases in Asia, Latin America and Africa into the substance of the concept's connotation. Reacting to the formalization of the European case, regionalism proposes studying regions. But far from solving the definitional problem, this proposal merely translates it to another concept (that of region) which also lacks any consensus as to its meaning.

Furthermore, two new influences increase further the denotative scope of regionalism and region - already huge in comparison with the significant definitional problems associated with regionalism and region since the 1960s and even before. Firstly, under the influence of economic views of *regionalism as trade*, regionalism and region release themselves from associations with territorial contiguity and proximity. Thus, Mansfield and Solingen (2010: 146) argue that the kind of policy coordination

involved in regionalism often *but by no means always* occurs among states located in close geographical proximity. In fact, economic integration is becoming a geographically diffuse phenomenon rather than a regional one (in the sense traditionally conceived) (Malamud and Gardini, 2012).

Thus, the use of the term region has increasingly become de-territorialised. However, Sbragia (2008:38) suggests that most political scientists take a less shallow view of regions, implying a relative “degree of interconnectedness”. But this single connotative trait does not take us very far, since regions (along with interconnectedness) may comprise phenomena within states, across states and between states. And it may also involve processes that do not pertain to states. Behr and Jokela (2011) record four different types of regions: micro-regions (intra-state regions); cross-border regions (several micro-regions in different states forming a unit across borders); sub-regions (several states which are part of larger macro-regional units); and macro-regions (large territorial units comprising several different states). This list can encompass any territorial unit from infra-state to macro-interstate region. Indeed, according to this logic, the only two categories that are dichotomous to that of the region are those of states and of the globe. Thus, Lombaerde et al (2010: 736) argue that regions may be defined by what they are not - that is, sovereign states - while Hettne and Söderbaum (2000: 361) argue that *a region is a relatively coherent territorial subsystem distinct from the rest of the global system*. We could conclude that regions are territorially based units that are neither states, nor global.

Secondly, the increasing influence of constructivism has also eroded the territorial basis of traditional and more intuitive understandings of region, and it has added ideational and normative elements into the mix. Regions are emergent, socially constructed phenomena. Several authors (i.e. Jessop 2003; Söderbaum 2013; Lombaerde et al 2010: 738; Acharya 2012) share the view that Katzenstein (1996) first advanced: regions are made and unmade - intentionally or unintentionally, endogenously or exogenously - through collective human action and identity formation.

In summary, conceptual ill-definition and vagueness, and a lack of consensus or “ontological disagreement” (Mansfield and Solingen; 2010: 146) remain the main problems of regionalism (Sbragia; 2008: 33; Behr and Jokela; 2011), although some (Lombaerde et al 2010: 740) argue that conceptual pluralism is not necessarily a problem. Authors have attempted to bypass the lack of conceptual clarity via two strategies: the use of associated concepts (2.1), and the different varieties of the concept (2.2). Both are reviewed below.

2.1 Associated terms: Regionalization and regionness

In order to defuse conceptual ambiguity, regionalism scholars have used associated concepts that, nonetheless, remain captive of the same definitional problems presented above, and so bring little additional clarification.

A. Regionalization

Current scholarship (Behr and Jokela; 2011; (Breslin and Higgott, 2000); (Fawcett & Gandois, 2010 Sbragia (2008) (Katzenstein, 2005) Acharya (2012) has consolidated a conceptual difference between “regionalisation” and “regionalism”. These two concepts correspond, respectively, to what Wallace (1990) insightfully named “informal” and “formal” integration. Regionalisation, or informal integration, refers to a spontaneous process of interaction between public and private actors, creating networks and directing flows toward each other in economic, security, cultural and other domains. The most important driving forces for economic regionalization come from markets, from private trade and investment flows, and from the policies and decisions of companies.

In general, authors concur on the argument that the boundaries between both remain porous: states often reinforce the actions of private actors, while the regional policies of public authorities may activate private actors’ actions. While this circularity is important, the main criticism derives from the

weak operationalization at issue. In general, studies on regionalization do not abound, but where they do occur, they may belong to the domains of neighbouring disciplines such as economics (trade flows, value chains, etc.) and sociology (identity formation), among others. In some cases, results can be discouraging; for instance, Pena and Rozenberg (2005) register a marginal role for civil society in MERCOSUR, arguing that the private sector and legislative representatives have not managed to constitute relevant forums of consultation, nor have they substantively contributed to promoting the integration initiative within their respective societies.

B. Regionness

The concept of regionalization is associated with regionness: 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. Regionalization can be described in terms of increasing levels of “regionness”, that is, the process whereby a geographical area is transformed from passive object to active subject capable of articulating the transnational interests of an emerging region (Hettne and Söderbaum, 2000; 2009). Regionness also means a multidimensional process of regionalization.

For *new regionalism* scholars (see below), the puzzle is to understand and explain the process through which regions come into existence and are consolidated – their “becoming”, so to speak – rather than a particular set of activities and flows within a pre-given regional framework (Söderbaum; 2013). But there is something mysterious about this process: if the interest is not in activities and flows, then who are the agents? And where, or with whom, does regional consciousness lay? Does regional consciousness only exist as idea, or should it be identified as a practice? If so, what is the difference between it and regionalization? Lately, the line between regionalization and regionness has been reminiscent of the Marxist distinction between *class in itself* and *class for itself*.

What is the balance of the use of these concepts that seek to complement regionalism? Lacking empirically robust research on regionalization and regionness, the shadow of formalization re-emerges: the majority of studies in the research field of comparative regionalism continue to focus on the policies of formal (even formalistic) regionalism as state-led projects (especially regional organizations), in so doing neglecting the processes of regionalisation and region-building, as well as civil society (Lombaerde et al; 2010: 737).

2.2. Varieties of regionalism (and regional integration)

Existing international organizations and other regional phenomena offer a wide menu from which contemporary studies of comparative regional integration can pick and choose. A selection bias operates whereby specific regional notions emerge tailor-made to suit particular models and even ideological preferences - bundled with appropriate adjectives to match. I do not review security regionalism here, due to lack of space.

A. New Regionalism (NR)

New regionalism is the general label used to differentiate current scholarship from the older regionalism associated with “integration theory”. According to its leading proponents (i.e. Hettne and Söderbaum 2009), regionalism today is a qualitatively different phenomenon due to several structural transformations of the global system. New regionalism is a comprehensive, multifaceted and multidimensional process, implying the changeover of a particular region from relative heterogeneity to increasing homogeneity along a number of dimensions - the most important being culture, security, economic policies and political regimes. In contrast to the study of integration, authors associated with “new regionalism” endorse conceptual pluralism, multiplicity of research questions (i.e. a loose methodological stance) and theoretical eclecticism (Lombaerde et al, 2010: 740). NR seeks to integrate approaches deriving from different disciplines that previously co-existed more or less

separately: the ones deriving from IR theory and international political economy, development theory and regional integration theory (Hettne and Söderbaum, 2009).

Two main claims sustain new regionalism: firstly, analysis must depart from Eurocentrism and its conceptual and theoretical tyranny; and secondly, the variety of existing modalities of regionalism requires paying equal attention to informal flows and arrangements - the multiple arenas and roles of ideas, culture and identity - as to formal organisations. In some of the definitions of new regionalism that seek to spell out connotation, the differences from “old regionalism” do not seem so obvious. Thus, Lombaerde et al (2010: 734) argue that current regionalism is “*a new political landscape in the making, characterised by an increasing set of actors (state and non-state) operating on the regional arena and across several interrelated dimensions (security, development, trade, environment, culture and so on)*”. The multidimensional side of the phenomenon is not new (just look at the sea of literature on European identity/culture and on European security), nor the increase in the number of actors. Neither is the involvement of non-state actors (consider the neofunctionalist interest in lobbies and transnational groups). Thus, beyond criticism of Eurocentrism, it is difficult to find conceptual novelty in new regionalism.

Tightly associated with NR is the attempt to periodize different stages for regionalism. This, again, faces a remarkable lack of consensus due to lack of agreement on the phenomena in question and their definition, as well as, even more importantly, lack of robust empirical evidence. Thus, Mansfield and Milner (1997; 1999) signal four waves of free trade cooperation, while Fawcett (2004) adopts a broader outlook, taking into account security, development and even postcolonial independence concerns. It might be pointed out that none of these incorporates the vast historical *acquis* of nineteenth-century Latin American projects, from the Pan-American Conference to the Central United Provinces (although Acharya (2012) considers Latin American projects during the twentieth century).

B. Open regionalism

Open regionalism may represent the most subtle and yet profound change made so far on the ideological paradigm of the former “old regionalism” or “integration”. Normally, the Asian Pacific Economic Forum (APEF) and one of its top inspirational figures, Bergsten (1997), get most of the credit for the formulating the new notion. However, somewhat earlier, the UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) had published a capital work (1994) which can be credited as the first comprehensive theoretical elaboration of the idea. This implied a radical departure from the ECLA's well-known 1950s model of “substitution of importations”, and was fleshed out by Prebisch, the first UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) General Secretary, before going on to inspire “inward looking” national projects in most of Latin America. While the reactivation of some Latin American regional schemes owes much to the change in paradigm, open regionalism also correlates strongly with the pivot of US policy towards mitigating the failure of multilateralism in the wake of GATT's Uruguay Round. In fact, one of the key components of this policy was the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).

Open regionalism directly addresses a core economic dilemma: in old economic integration theory, the stages leading to economic union implied an *internal* opening up of trade and lowering of tariffs which did not necessarily imply a corresponding *external* opening up. Hence, a central issue for proponents of open regionalism relates to securing the compatibility between regional and global openness. While some fear that regional agreements will exclude more efficient competitors in third countries (Panagariya, 1999), proponents of open regionalism see them as a device through which regionalization can be employed to accelerate the progress toward global liberalization and rule-making (Bergsten, 1997: 3; ECLA, 1994). Meanwhile some leading economists (Krugman, 1993) take more eclectic positions, arguing that the evidence is not conclusive in either direction, and suggesting that more research is needed. In summary, economic analysis of regionalism has produced no consensus on its welfare effects (Mansfield and Solingen; 2010: 149)

The conceptions lying behind the APEF and ECLA theorisations differ subtly. For the former, open regionalism implies the maximum possible extent of unilateral liberalization; a commitment to reduce its barriers to non-member countries while it liberalises internally on an *Most Favoured Nation* (MFN) basis; the willingness to extend regional liberalization to non-members on a mutually reciprocal basis; and a recognition that any individual APEC member can unilaterally extend its APEC liberalization to non-members on a conditional or unconditional basis (Bergsten, 1997). Sharing these essential principles, the ECLA agenda also includes the promotion of a process of growing economic interdependence at the regional level; this is promoted by preferential integration agreements and by other policies, in a context of liberalization and de-regulation. This is geared towards enhancing the competitiveness of the countries in the region and, in so far as possible, constituting the building blocks for a more open and transparent international economy. The “preferential element” reflects the geographical closeness and cultural affinity of the countries in the region concerned (ECLA, 1994).

C. Post-liberal regionalism

Post-liberal regionalism seems to be an intellectual creation peculiar to Latin America. In the background has lain the clash between several leftish Latin American governments (each with strong social agendas) and the Washington Consensus, as well as strong academic criticism of open regionalism (*inter alia*: Chaves García, 2010; Gudynas, 2005; Motta Veiga and Rios, 2007; Sanahuja, 2008; 2011). Political leaders and scholars coincide in their diagnosis and, indeed, criticism of open regionalism. To quote Gudynas, “*Many of the regional integration experiments of Latin America ended up being processes that stressed insertion into the global economy and economic dependence, and trapped countries into exporting raw materials without industrializing*” (Gudynas; 2005). Furthermore, several argue also that this model of liberalization may reduce the margins for national development policies, as well as for the adoption of an agenda of social equality (Motta Veiga & Ríos; 2007: 23). But open regionalism has also been closely associated in Latin America with consolidating the hegemony of US multinationals and structural adjustment policies - in other words, neoliberalism - to the point that they become practically irreversible. This, in turn, would be a major step towards copper-fastening US hegemony over the international system. Hence, open regionalism is seen as an attempt by the US to entrench its global and regional hegemony (Tussie, 2009).

Some leftish governments in Latin America identified groups such as MERCOSUR and CAN as promoters of neoliberal policies (and their negative effects) (Sanahuja, 2011: 122). Their rejection led to initiatives such as UNASUR and ALBA, which do not correspond to the traditional Bela-Balassa stages model; nor do they transfer sovereign powers, and both can be considered the genuine expression of post-liberal regionalism (Sanahuja, 2011:120) - or indeed defensive regionalism, that is an attempt to fend off moves by the US to build out its pre-eminence and hegemony across the Americas (Tussie, 2009). Six features distinguish post-liberal regionalism: the dominance of the political agenda over trade; the recovery of the development agenda; state leadership vis-à-vis private sectors and markets; more emphasis on positive integration; an interest in physical integration; and greater relevance of social questions (Sanahuja, 2008).

3. The methodological dimension: what to compare, how to compare?

Methodological problems of comparative regionalism are reminiscent of those of comparative politics decades ago: despite paying lip service to comparison, very few works do really compare at all. Authors (e.g. Sbragia; 2008: 23; Söderbaum; 2009; Lombaerde et al: 2010: 733) concur in their diagnosis of “comparative regionalism” as the study of a single regionalist project outside Europe and, hence, others mark developing its comparative element as the next step in the study of regionalism (Söderbaum; 2013). So, comparative regionalism compares very little. This methodological problem is not field-specific. Rather, regionalism reflects again upon issues already discussed in mainstream

political science since the 1960s, and it repeats the diagnosis recorded several decades ago in comparative politics: that we should practise what we preach (Mayer, 1983).

Regionalism's preference for case studies does not have an epistemological foundation. Beyond avoiding Eurocentrism, authors (e.g. Lombaerde et al., 2010: 744; Söderbaum, 2009) identify the complex (sic.) nature of regionalism, the less rigorous testing of hypotheses required by this approach, and, above all, the predominance of region-specialised scholars as the reasons for the dominance of the case study. Area scholar dominance, in particular, has deeply influenced new regionalism: empirically at least, most scholars specialise in a particular region, which they often consider "special" or "unique", reinforcing the idiosyncratic bias.

While regionalism shares the old comparing nothing problem which mainstream political science faced some decades ago, poor conceptualization adds methodological difficulties. Even though comparison and the comparative method have a few canonical rules, bypassing them threatens sound empirical research. The first essential rule is that classification of phenomena comes before any meaningful comparison: the same species and genus members can be compared. (Although it is important to note that this differs from the logic of case selection, and from the question of most similar versus most different cases in research design.) For this, the essential operation is, again, conceptual definition: since social science phenomena require concepts for their identification, a proper formulation of concepts is essential. And this again brings up the issue of the absence of definition in the field of regionalism. Few authors have fleshed out *empirically* classifications of regionalism, and even when this has been done (i.e. Hettne and Söderbaum 2009), the results end up trapped in the same murky definitional waters as described above: over-conceptualization with no empirical substance behind it. For instance, these authors define regional convergence (increasing regionness) as a situation whereby a region becomes a relevant unit of analysis in international relations terms - that is, when the region plays a role in relations with the rest of the world - and when a wide range of issues within a given region come to be organised at a regional level. Clearly, by these yardsticks, almost everything amounts to regional convergence. While conceptual clarity makes easier the identification of suitable cases for comparison (Lombaerde, 2010: 747), it clashes with conceptual pluralism, which is a basic tenet of regionalism).

The second specific methodological problem of regionalism has to do with the selection of the unit and level of analysis. When "regions" or processes such as "regionalization" are taken as the unit of analysis, comparisons become difficult because their ill-definition. Comparison at that level turns into a never-ending exercise in contrasting idiosyncratic processes. New regionalism has totally discredited the alternative option of comparing formal organisations (Etzioni, 1974; Haas, 1961; 1967; Haas and Schmitter, 1964; Nye, 1968; Nye, 1970; Schmitter, 1970) - with this approach, which had earlier predominated, falling from grace on account of its purported Eurocentrism.

This concern may hold if what is at stake is comparing the success of different projects. However, a more rigorous selection of the level and unit of analysis opens up new possibilities for comparison. The scientific path followed by EU students teaches us something (which is not the same as saying that the EU teaches us something): after decades of sub-optimal theorisation of similar kinds of meta-theoretical issues, scholars have turned to different levels in the study of the EU. This explains the way that federal comparisons between the EU and other federal systems (such as the US or Germany) have been organised, which can be seen at the level of federal law studies (Stein; 1981 and Mancini, 1989), federal policy-making studies (Scharpf, 1988), and studies of the design of the federation itself (Fabbrini, 2007; Nicolaïdis and Howse, 2001; Sbragia, 1992). Leaving aside any apologetic or propagandistic attitude, the EU can provide one case among others to explain, for instance, why supranationalism does not dominate economic integration (Kahler and Lake, 2009) or use it as one of the cases in a small N data set of institutions such as courts (Alter, 2012). Institutional design across organizations may be compared, as may ideas, actors' strategies, and so forth. Moreover, dynamic studies may observe the patterns of diffusion: even open regionalism scholars argue that regional trade agreements (RTAs) have a demonstration effect for other groups of states (Bergsten, 1997: 2).

Connecting with the paradigm of “regionalism as trade”, there also exist large N studies; this applies in particular to Free Trade Agreements. According to the WTO, in January 2015 there were 604 notifications and 398 RTAs in force. This provides a large empirical data set that has allowed a flourishing literature on the topic. But, as argued above, diluting regionalism within trade makes little *conceptual* sense.

4. A word on theory

Among other aspirations, regionalism aimed at releasing the study of regions other than Europe from the overweening influence of European integration theory. Scientific falsification of (European) integration theory had already started by the 1970s, but regionalism authors have taken a different scientific aim: they attack the “normative model” (i.e. the assumption that the EU is the exemplar of integration) implicit or explicit in comparisons of the EU with other international organisations aiming at “integration”.

In the rejection of the European model, there is an implicit (and often explicit) assumption: integration of the European type differs from regionalism. On the one hand, the kind of dynamic between national interest and regionalism is similar to the European case (see, for instance, Hettne and Söderbaum argue that regionalism cannot be understood as a distinct alternative to national interest and nationalization, but rather can often be better explained as an instrument to supplement, enhance or protect the role of the state and the power of the government in an interdependent world (Hettne and Söderbaum, 2009). This somehow echoes Milward’s thesis on the European rescue of the nation state (Milward et al., 1992). On the other hand, the differences in relation to state sovereignty do not seem scientifically well conceived: according to Acharya (2012: 12), integration by definition implies transfer or loss of sovereignty, either voluntarily or under pressure - but regionalism does not. If regionalism does not apply to states, the distinction may hold; but if states are involved, then what is needed is an explanation of the differences in sovereignty, as well as in how these differences are conceived, across various states.

Regionalism seems to treat as a distinctive ontological feature of European states what is in fact common to any state: loss of sovereignty. If the assumption that maintenance of sovereignty is essential to the existence of any state is correct, then it could be argued that no state will openly or explicitly pursue the objective of losing its sovereign statehood. Building on this assumption and working within a comparative approach, the challenge in comparative regionalism is to explain what factors may affect and condition the loss of sovereignty that takes place through regionalism or integration. Reflecting on this issue, Sanhuja (2011:16) writes that both in Africa and Latin America, the necessity to assert national sovereignty has acted as a deterrent to formal means of regional integration. Asian nations also share the same concern about sovereignty. However, for African and Latin American states, regional integration also acquired significance, paradoxically, as a defensive institution vis-à-vis imperialism and external dominance, and as an instrument to limit the dominance of hegemonic liberal doctrines. Another form of comparing different regionalism or regional integration process is looking on the critical junctures at in which states may have agreed to yield some sovereignty because other factors. In this line, for instance, Lincoln (2004) writes that “*whilst in Europe Franco-German conflict and reconciliation are normally considered the trigger and reason for European integration, in Asia, Chinese-Japanese tensions originating in WWI and before are presented as insurmountable obstacles to greater cooperation*”.

5. Conclusion: mainstreaming regionalism

Some scholars consider new regionalism not a theory but an intellectual movement to broaden the scope of regionalism studies, taking into consideration the impact of globalization (Acharya; 2012: 8). Reacting to the broader theoretical ambition of early integration theory, these scholars have

successfully fenced off a “research field”. In this respect, regionalism proposes an emerging paradigm (a set of questions, research subjects, methods, etc. which dominate normal science at a certain period in time). And yet, the paradigm is a weak one because it is predicated on conceptual pluralism, theoretical eclecticism and methodological indifference. When selecting specific levels and units of analysis different to the macro concepts, researchers may find little support or attention for their scientific work within a field that is so loosely demarcated. Ultimately the question is: what does regionalism add? Operationalising research on topics within the purview of regionalism - such as institutional design and formal organizations; policies and public goods provision; and flows such as trade and supply and demand chains; or even identity and culture - may benefit little from the conceptual and theoretical tools associated with regionalism. Moreover, these conceptual and theoretical tools may be superfluous, irrelevant or, at worst, obstacles. In a certain sense, regionalism displays some elementary scientific fragilities -such as over-conceptualization accompanied by a lack of sufficient sound empirical evidence. In parallel, the methodological limitations show similar traits, even if they merely echo earlier methodological problems in mainstream comparative politics.

Regionalism scholars have preached the release of research from the tyranny of “old Eurocentric” integration theory. However valuable this goal, supporters of the paradigm have thrown the baby out with the bathwater: they forgot that mainstream political science sub-disciplines such as comparative politics, public policy and even international relations totally displaced integration theory in the study of the EU. In this respect, NRA authors have assembled their case by kicking a corpse (i.e. integration theory). And if integration theory died sometime in the 1970s or 1980s, why is it that regionalism scholars come back once again to criticise it? Through doing so, they have failed to register that mainstream theoretical political science approaches (new institutionalism, rational choice and constructivism) have acquired hegemonic status as explanatory frameworks in EU scholarship. Perhaps regionalism will go through the same cathartic experience; that is, rather than constituting a field so loosely defined, the set of phenomena normally included need to be mainstreamed by bringing them within the domain of political science sub-disciplines, and within the lens of mainstream explanatory theory. Stricter conceptualizations and more demanding methodologies, together with more sophisticated research analysis, will bring “regionalism” within mainstream political science disciplines.

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Author contacts:

Carlos Closa

Global Governance Programme

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

European University Institute

Villa La Fonte

Via delle Fontanelle 18

I-50014 San Domenico di Fiesole

Email: carlos.closa@eui.eui