

## **Repositioning Europe in the study of regions: comparative regionalism, interregionalism and decentred regionalism**

**Frank Mattheis**

**Regionalism in Africa: Genealogies, Institutions and Trans-state Networks**, by Daniel C. Bach, Routledge, 2016, ISBN 9781138839885.

**The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism**, by Tanja A. Börzel, and Thomas Risse, Oxford University Press, 2016, ISBN 9780199682300.

**Drivers of Integration and Regionalism in Europe and Asia**, by Louis Brennan, and Philomena Murray, Routledge, 2015, ISBN 9781138819818.

**Rethinking Regionalism**, by Fredrik Söderbaum, Palgrave, 2016, ISBN 9780230272408.

**Interregionalism and the European Union: A Post-Revisionist Approach to Europe's Place in a Changing World**, by Mario Telò, Louise Fawcett, and Frederik Ponjaert, Ashgate, 2015, ISBN 9781472473233.

### **Reconciling EU studies with regionalism studies - the research agenda**

The constitution of European Union (EU) studies has long been an exclusionary process, both dealing extensively with internal debates and arguing for an own discipline within or even next to political sciences and international relations (Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond 2010). Due to the self-centredness on the vivid development of the EU, other regions were largely disregarded when it came to theory building or only taken into account later as comparators. Though not all approaches have depended on the EU as an object of study, many implicitly carried assumptions based on the European experience. Concepts such as supranationalism cannot be easily de- and re-contextualised if other categories, such as the state, mean different things in a different context (Söderbaum 2012). Regionalisms outside of Europe are therefore easily characterised as deficient if an archetypical status is attributed to the EU. These shortcomings have fuelled an on-going debate concerning the role of studying the EU in the context of the broader research on regionalism. The more the dichotomy between the EU and the “rest” was strengthened, the more it turned into parochialism. The tendency to understand the EU as a unique entity and phenomenon has been expressed in the “small n” problem in academics (Genna and de Lombaerde 2010) and in the frequent *sui generis* statements by policy makers. In order to avoid such Eurocentrism, many other scholars of regionalism have tried to avoid the EU in theorising efforts (Bøas, Marchand and Shaw 2005).

This polarising fragmentation over the role of the EU created a gap between EU studies and regionalism studies (Postel-Vinay 2007). As a reaction, extensive critiques have been formulated in this journal (cf. *Journal of European Integration* Special Issue: Rethinking EU Studies: the Contribution of Comparative Regionalism, 2010) with attempts to recombine the two approaches. For instance, the constructivist move away from institutions towards norms, values and identities made Europe more comparable. Throughout these (sub)-disciplinary debates, an increasing number of scholars made considerable efforts to overcome the conundrum of an evident theoretical and empirical

EU-centric bias. Such innovations contest dominant theoretical approaches and the division between the EU and other regionalisms.

Recent scholarly contributions to this endeavour pursue at least one of three approaches. The first one is comparative regionalism with the aim to treat the EU as being one particular case of regionalism, but one among others nonetheless. The second approach focuses on the concept of interregionalism, defined as relations and transfers between existing regionalisms. While the EU might still constitute a *prima facie* empirical point of reference, it is not considered the main factor for regionalisms elsewhere. The third approach proposes to decentre regionalism by looking at generalisable logics of regionalism without negating differences pointing to contextualised characteristics. Regionalisms in other parts of the world are investigated in a way that can be potentially applied to other cases, including the EU.

### Comparative regionalism

Comparative regionalism emerged in the 1960s and was mainly concerned with explanatory variables for the emergence of regionalisms in and outside of Europe. After lying idle for several decades, the emergence of a new generation of regionalisms in the turmoil of the restructuring of the new post-Cold War global order brought the topic back into academia. Nevertheless, single case studies still dominate the field and reviewing the literature on comparing regionalisms means facing a ubiquity of the EU either as source of knowledge or as counterpoint.

Comparative scholars stress the necessity for non-idiosyncratic theoretical approaches and definitions of regionalism but many have struggled to overcome the conundrum of combining theory-building with tackling Eurocentrism. *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism* by Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse offers a rich account of the foundations and limitations of this research field. The meticulousness and the coherence of the handbook is indicative of it being a flagship outcome of the research college that the two editors direct at the Free University in Berlin. The 27 chapters of the weighty handbook combine the expertise of leading scholars of International Relations and aim to transcend the boundaries of area or sector specialisation.

After outlining a number of theoretical foundations in section one, the handbook consistently engages with three crosscutting lenses: the drivers, the effects and the design of regionalism. The second section on regional orders follows a conventional area studies division. While some chapters interpret comparison as highlighting unique aspects of their region vis-à-vis other world regions and therefore reinforce the pre-given regional delineation, others focus on the comparison of regionalisms within their allocated region, which results in multiple, often ambivalent layers of regionalism that expose the limits of dominant geographical divisions of the world. The third section revolves around regional governance, which is not a novel concept but is seldom applied in such a comprehensive manner. In this section the reader finds a rich repository of how comparative regionalism can overcome EU-centrism in research design. The fourth section looks at institutions and proposes ways to categorise formalised regional organisations, again trying to position the EU as a case among others rather than a benchmark.

The authorship reflects existing research interests and networks of the editors, broadly captured as European integration and transatlantic relations. While this and the penchant for constructivism have contributed to the coherence of the book and to a greater attention to comparative regionalism in recent research agendas in Europe and North America, it also means that authors based in other parts of the world are thin on the ground (two out of 28). Since the publication of the book, the editors went to great lengths to engage academia in Latin America, Africa and Asia with the handbook but the

dominant European and North American perspective of the book passed up the chance to further de-centre the production of knowledge about comparative regionalism, as chapter six advocates for.

As one would expect from a handbook, it constitutes a work of reference with detailed appendixes that provide readers with coherent and succinct chapters. However, this being a handbook, it represents a certain canon of the sub-discipline of comparative regionalism, including established but debatable dichotomies such as between regionalisation and regionalism. Some of the shortcomings are acknowledged but not resolved, in particular the prevalent state-centric approach: the bulk of the chapters limit themselves to understanding regionalism as an exercise of formal regional organisations created by sovereign nation states.

*Drivers of Integration and Regionalism in Europe and Asia* by Louis Brennan and Philomena Murray dedicates itself to one of the main threads of *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, namely to explain why regionalisms in Europe and Asia - alas for most parts effectively reduced to the EU and ASEAN - are "formed and sustained". The two editors of the 23 chapters, based at the Trinity College in Dublin and at the University of Melbourne respectively, thus narrow their contribution to comparative regionalism both conceptually and geographically. Though there are less authors based in Asia than their endeavour might warrant - especially in the first section that sets the theoretical and analytical framework, the editors have found a valuable mixture of academics and policy-makers.

With the comparison of European and Asian regionalism in mind, the first section exercises due care in outlining theoretical, historical and institutional requisites. Sections two, three and four regroup contributions concerning three different types of drivers of integration: crises, security concerns and economic actors. Section two with two antipodal chapters is particularly convincing in providing substantial ground to the claim that each driver of integration carries an immanent driver of disintegration and vice-versa. This insight grants more room to manoeuvre to actors of regionalism than often assumed. The following two sections might have benefitted from a similarly clear structure, as the chapters within the sections speak less to each other the further the book progresses. A noticeable shortcoming of the book relates to the overlaps between several chapters, in particular within section five. This section is wide-rangingly embraced by the heading "Rethinking regionalism, inter-regionalism and multilateralism" and lacks a coherent thread. The book makes a respectable effort to follow a reciprocal approach and asks what Europe may learn from Asian integration. Though the bias of "integration snobbery" is not entirely overcome in the chapters of section six, the reader gets a concrete idea of how Europe and Asia are entangled in their regional efforts. A second redundancy concerns the conclusion. Rather than being structured towards the central questions posed in the beginning, Murray and Brennan to a large part paraphrase the chapter-by-chapter summaries already provided in the introductory chapter. Readers will still appreciate that the understandings of the role of lobbying business actors or of food security considerations can be fruitfully transferred from studies of Asian regionalism to EU studies or vice-versa as well as to other regionalisms.

## Interregionalism

The proliferation of regionalisms around the world has in several instances been accompanied by increased institutional capacities and identities that enable regionalism to become relevant actors in international relations. The literature on interregionalism - much like comparative regionalism - tends to orbit around formal state and EU centred initiatives. However, for the concept of interregionalism to be meaningful, it should not only be a synonym of the EU's external presence.

The edited volume *Interregionalism and the European Union: A Post-Revisionist Approach to Europe's Place in a Changing World* by Mario Telò, Louise Fawcett and Frederik Ponjaert explicitly

addresses this challenge and proposes a middle ground between Eurocentrism and Euroscepticism. Their synthesising approach encompasses the endeavour to acknowledge the pivotal empirical role of the EU in global interregionalism but seeks to neither exclude nor overemphasise the EU. The post-revisionist perspective is eruditely introduced and developed by the editors in the first section of the book. It is sustained by the conceptually convincing argument that the role of the EU for interregionalism can be meaningfully studied without having to fall into a normative trap. The research question that the book deduces concerns the impact of the EU's interregionalism on drivers of regionalism elsewhere, a theme that resonates with parts of *Drivers of Integration and Regionalism in Europe and Asia*. Unfortunately, such a research question falls short of the post-revisionist perspective posited beforehand, as it maintains a unidirectional understanding of interregionalism in which policies emanate from one side only and do not circulate. In this respect, the book lags behind the volume of Murray and Brennan. A volume with a primary interest in the impact to the EU's interregional policies elsewhere might also have benefitted from more authors based in those regions, though the ratio is more favourable than in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*. The merit of the book is thus in diversifying the research agenda of a EU-centric discipline rather than promoting a global school of thought on regionalism. The main sections of the book are ordered in a convincing categorisation of drivers of regionalism into de facto, de jure, cognitive and instrumental. While the structure is adequate, not all chapters blend easily into their assigned section, which is partly due to the editors' commitment to draw from a large variety of theoretical positions and partly due to the varying quality of contributions.

Apart from a chapter on NATO, surprisingly little is found in the book about the impact of EU's interregionalism within its own region. Positioning the Europe's place in the world would warrant explaining how other regionalisms within Europe project different identities and institutions rather than assuming a monolithic role of the EU. Moreover, the lack of reciprocal perspectives and limited direct interaction between the chapters of the empirical sections leave the reader with a potpourri of contributions that share the interest in systematically assessing the EU's interregionalism but do not necessarily reflect the post-revisionist spirit. Apart from the editors, the authors do not explicitly refer to the concept or its proposals - such as a *longue durée* approach - and it is left to the conclusion to a posteriori re-introduce the common thread. Nevertheless, the shortcomings do not diminish the main merit of the book, which is to examine the EU's interregionalism from a fresh perspective.

### Decentred regionalism

Many scholars have stressed the necessity for non-idiosyncratic approach to regionalism that accommodates existing and emerging regions. If regionalism experiences across the world were treated as unique phenomena, the derived concepts of regionalism would have little to offer for other regions.

*Regionalism in Africa: Genealogies, Institutions and Trans-state Networks* by Daniel Bach offers a stellar example of a comprehensive account of explanations and concepts, which are derived from one region but emit relevance far beyond it. The book is divided into seven chapters and complemented with an extensive bibliography of literature relating to African regionalism. In each chapter the author skilfully juggles with different intellectual lenses and terms stemming from different disciplines, including anthropology and borderland studies. The second chapter puts forward the concept of hysteresis to remind readers of the willing adherence to inherited imperial regionalisms despite emancipatory Pan-African projects. The third chapter investigates the logics of regionalism beyond their prescribed ambitions while the fourth chapter posits the border as an essential pre-condition for

regionalism in Africa. The fifth and sixth chapters engage with the adaptation of external models and with the emergence of regional economic spaces without governing institutions.

Though rooted in detailed accounts of African regionalism the reader easily picks up that none of these concepts ought to be reduced to an African phenomenon, not least thanks to the many cross-references to other world regions. This book expertly synthesises the insights Bach has accumulated during decades of research on the political economy of African regionalism, in particular on neo-patrimonialism, transnational networks and regionalisation. The compelling argument that such concepts have explanatory value beyond the African case makes the book stand out from many other studies.

A French scholar trained in Oxford and specialised in Nigeria, Bach is uniquely positioned to transcend the intellectual barriers between Francophone and Anglophone Africa and to identify intersections between them. However, the flipside is that Lusophone countries are only attributed a marginal role and that their contextualisation is limited to their geographic neighbours rather than being embedded into the socio-cultural regionalisms of the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries and the ideology of lusotropicalism. The terra-centric view of Africa as a container for regionalism also precludes more attention to maritime regionalisms in the Indian and Atlantic oceans or the Mediterranean. Despite these geographic shortcomings, a prevalence of path dependency and some conceptual inaccuracies (as in the partly blurred distinction between regionalism as a phenomenon or a concept), the book is an enjoyable read and offers insights to scholars to re-examine their regions, including Europe, in a new light.

Fredrik Söderbaum follows the same route from a broader perspective in his book *Rethinking Regionalism*. The author, who represents together with Björn Hettne one of the eminent figures of regionalism scholarship emanating from the University of Gothenburg, reflects on more than two decades of debates about how to theorise, conceptualise and analyse regionalisms. The thirteen short chapters expertly guide the reader through these debates, both the fruitful ones and the ones leading into impasses. The main thread of the book is an understanding that is inclusive of the multiple layers of regionalism: informal and formal, European and non-European, state and non-state, with positive and negative effects on development. The book offers an excellent insight into lessons to be drawn from the debates on regionalism that occurred between roughly 1990 and 2010. However, the relative small attention given to recent works leaves the reader puzzled if the scholarship has by now been able to respond to such calls and produce the sort of research that Söderbaum argues for. As the title promises, the book rethinks regionalisms but it would have benefitted from connecting more with current efforts to put such an agenda into research practice.

Like Bach, Söderbaum is not afraid to turn to other disciplines in order to explore the transferability of concepts and his most convincing arguments can be related to streams of thought that were not originally designed for the study of regionalism. In her book review, Alessandra Russo (2016) likened his argument to focus on how regions are constructed both by imaginations and by practices to Henri Lefebvre's seminal work on conceived and perceived spaces (1974). Similarly, one can interpret Söderbaum's understanding of regions being both territorial and social as an invitation to introduce Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss' notion of civilisation (1909) to the study of regionalism. The greatest merit of this book is thus to make regionalism a more pluralist topic of social sciences.

The author goes to great lengths to establish an impartial place for the EU in regionalism studies. He repeatedly points out which cases outside of Europe may serve as useful comparators, which concepts could be transferred to Europe and which phenomena in Europe have been marginalised from integration theory. At the same time, Söderbaum convincingly argues that not everything is comparable and transferable, which can be read as an assurance to scholars of the EU that not all of their research needs to be dissolved in regionalism studies.

## On track to normalising Europe in the study of regionalism?

The five books reviewed here all deal with regionalism and interregionalism from a perspective of overcoming EU-centrism. They all succeed in providing a better understanding of the EU's place in regionalism studies and by consequence also help recalibrate the EU's place in the world. All books caution from overemphasising the European experience or the particular theories associated with that experience. The main rationale of comparative regionalism, interregionalism and decentred regionalism is to acknowledge the heterogeneity of regions without losing track of the entanglement of regionalisms within and between regions. All regionalisms can be conceived as actors that - though with varying degrees of coherence and effectiveness - have a capacity to change local, regional and global orders. The next step would now be to include other world regions in knowledge production (see Vivares and Dolcetti-Marcolini 2016).

Many flaws in efforts to normalise Europe in the study of regionalism remain, in particular concerning the cross-applicability of concepts. While the knowledge gaps have been convincingly identified in all books the main difficulty still seems to lie in venturing into them. All books remind us that we still know too little about regionalism that is not confined to the regional organisations and about actors other than nation states. With respect to European integration, looking elsewhere makes us realise that we also still know too little about the impact of other regionalisms on European integration, about the relationship between the multitude of perceived and conceived delineations of Europe, and about the effects of malign or illicit region-building.

Having these five books at our disposal we have a well-grounded wealth of intellectual work that gives direction to the study of regionalism and provides us various tools to strike this path. In the words of Pinar Bilgin (2017): "Avoiding Eurocentrism is not about avoiding studying the EU, but about how we study the EU." After the agenda-setting we need to give way to the production of transcending, reciprocal and global research to get out of the comfort zone of formal regional organisations. Time to get to work!

## References

- Bilgin P (2017) A Global International Relations Take on the 'Immigrant Crisis'. In: *TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research*, 09.01.2017, <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/5699>.
- Bøas M, Marchand MH and Shaw TM (eds) (2005) *The political economy of regions and regionalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Durkheim E and Mauss M (1909) Note sur la notion de Civilisation. *L'Année Sociologique* 12, pp. 46-50.
- Genna GM and de Lombaerde P (2010) The Small N Methodological Challenges of Analyzing Regional Integration. *Journal of European Integration* 32(6), pp. 583–95.
- Lefebvre H (1974) *La production de l'espace*: Paris: Anthropos.
- Postel-Vinay K (2007) The Historicity of the International Region: Revisiting the "Europe and the Rest" Divide. *Geopolitics* 12(4), pp. 555–69.
- Russo A (2016) Comparative regionalism: Still emerging, already to be reformed? *International Politics Reviews* 4(1), pp. 7-16.
- Söderbaum F (2012) Theories of Regionalism. In: Beeson M (ed) *Routledge handbook of Asian regionalism*. London: Routledge, pp. 11-21.

Vivares E and Dolcetti-Marcolini M (2016) Two regionalisms, two Latin Americas or beyond Latin America? Contributions from a critical and decolonial IPE. *Third World Quarterly* 37(5), pp. 866-882.

Warleigh-Lack A and Rosamond B (2010) Across the EU Studies-New Regionalism Frontier: Invitation to a Dialogue. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 48(4), pp. 993–1013.