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*New Regionalism and European Studies  
Towards a Comprehensive Approach to  
Regionalisation and Regions*

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to bridge the emerging gap between European studies and new regionalism scholarship, and second, to add to the debate surrounding the revision of the new regionalism approach. The paper outlines the new regionalism framework by bringing together elements from post-modern international relations-based theories and multilevel governance and network approaches. Particular attention is paid to the conceptualisation of the construct 'region' and regionalisation processes for the purpose of comparative analysis. As such the paper aims to make a contribution towards a more comprehensive understanding of the international phenomenon of regionalism.

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## Introduction\*

Theoretical work on regionalism has long been dominated by the European experience. Not only has that resulted in the emergence of Euro-centric integration theories but also in the academic divide between the intergovernmentalist and neofunctional schools of thought. The failure of both these two broad categories to generate any workable theories of integration has given rise to the emergence of new paradigms theorising regionalism.

In the wake of these developments two sub-fields of regionalism theory are emerging. The first is firmly rooted in European studies and draws inspiration from comparative politics.<sup>1</sup> Examples are the wide variety of multilevel governance and even network approaches. These approaches focus on particular features of the European process, leaving little room for more holistic understandings.

The second has deliberately abandoned the European integration process and emphasises international relations and international political economy based approaches. The diversity of these emerging paradigms is often summarised under the headline 'new regionalism' in contrast to the 'old regionalism' of orthodox integration theory. In fact, a new dichotomy has appeared, more firmly than ever before, separating scholars of European integration and international relations-based scholars of regionalisation processes. This appears to be problematic inasmuch as both sides are involved in the study of the same phenomenon, i.e. regionalisation.

This paper argues that the rift between new regionalism approaches and new advances in European studies is counterproductive and artificial. Instead of regarding them as opposing paradigms, the paper argues that elements of both schools can be synthesised in a useful manner within the new

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'European studies' is used as a phrase to catch the amazing variety of theoretical work analysing the European project.

regionalism framework for the conceptualisation of the construct 'region' and processes of regionalisation. The paper aims to bring different macro and meso level theories together in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the nature and determinants of regionalism and the linkages with international order and the globalisation process. As such the paper makes a case for the development of a framework facilitating the comparability of different integration and regionalisation processes. Indeed, the Euro-centrism inherent in many traditional approaches severely limits their insights into the more general aspects of regionalism. At the same time, however, new regionalism scholarship appears to have carefully avoided and downplayed the importance of European integration. This is very astonishing as it was the European process which gave birth to the 'new regionalism' as an empirical phenomenon with the revival of European integration during the mid-1980s.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the revision of the new regionalism approach. In a first step, the paper outlines an interpretation of the new regionalism framework for the comparative analysis of regionalism by bringing together elements of new regionalism scholarship and new advances in European studies. This framework will be applied to conceptualise the construct 'region' in a second step in order to demonstrate how elements of both paradigms can be synthesised for the benefit of a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of regions and regionalisation.

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<sup>2</sup> The 'new regionalism' as used in this paper refers to both: new advances in theorising regionalism and an empirical phenomenon denoting a new wave of regionalism beginning with the Single European Act in Europe. Proponents of the new regionalism claim that the latest wave of regionalisation is qualitatively different compared to its predecessor, the old regionalism. It takes place in a new context, e. g. the post-Cold War world.

## **Bridging the Inter-Paradigm Divide – The New Regionalism Framework**

### *New Developments in Theorising Regionalism – Multilevel Governance and New Regionalism Scholarship*

Critiques of orthodox integration theory, on the 'old regionalism', particularly with regard to the dominance of the intergovernmentalist/ neofunctional divide and rationalist epistemologies, have resulted in the development of new international relations-based approaches to regionalism. New regionalism stands out in this context. The so-called 'new regionalism' has become a hotly debated issue in academic circles during the last decade. Partly responsible are forces unleashed by a worldwide structural transformation process following the end of the Cold War. These forces and the globalisation process in general are re-defining the structural and agentive relations between national, regional and global contexts (Väyrynen 2003: 25). Yet at the same time regional images are often based on outdated concepts, which make it necessary to re-examine the theoretical foundations of regionalisation and regionalism and to reformulate the concept 'region'.

Theoretical approaches to regionalism and regionalisation deal with different aspects of the same phenomenon. They use different assumptions and, hence, come to different conclusions. However, almost all of them concentrate on certain topics and issues while leaving others aside. Thus, they are able to explain certain outcomes, procedures and policies but fail to present the whole picture.<sup>3</sup> New regionalism theory offers an interesting opportunity to side-step some of the problems characterising 'old regionalism' approaches, in particular the neofunctionalism/ intergovernmentalism gridlock.

While this is not the place to rehearse a critique of each variant [of

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<sup>3</sup> However, one should bear in mind that all abstract models simplify reality for the sake of analysing a particular problem. A model that would consider all details of the colourful reality would be as useful as a map with a scale of one to one.

integration theory], all of them are deficient inasmuch as they understate power relations, deal inadequately or not at all with production, and fail to offer an explanation of structural transformation. In some ways a break with this tradition, the new regionalism approach explores contemporary forms of transnational cooperation and cross-border flows through comparative, historical, and multilevel perspectives (Mittelmann 1996: 189).

Proponents and pioneers of the new regionalism, such as Björn Hettne and Frederick Söderbaum, stress the necessity for a wider framework for the analysis and understanding of regions and regional processes, taking not only political and economic factors into account but also the influence of socio-cultural aspects while placing regional developments in a wider international context (Hettne and Söderbaum 2002: 33).

Since the 'new regionalism' is closely linked to global structural change and globalisation, it cannot be understood merely from the view of the single region in question. What we are looking for specifically is a global theory that takes regional peculiarities into consideration. ... Global social theory means a comprehensive social science that abandons state-centrism in an ontologically fundamental sense. Social process must be analysed delinked from national space (Hettne and Söderbaum 2002: 35).

A whole new corpus of theory is evolving, self-consciously differentiating itself from the study of the European phenomenon. An excellent overview of the various strands of new regionalism scholarship has been presented by Frederick Söderbaum and Timothy Shaw (2003). It is evident that new regionalism is a very wide ranging body of literature comprising various forms of regionalisation processes and institutional structures. What differentiates the various interpretations of the new regionalism from its predecessor (theories of 'old' regionalism) is the analytical focus on a multitude of actors in regionalisation processes, including public and private actors (Hettne 2003: 24-25). Both, institutionalised as well as non-institutionalised processes need to

be studied as well as macro- and micro-regionalism. And, perhaps most importantly, regionalisation has to be seen in the context of developments at the wider international level. In particular, more attention has to be paid to exogenous factors such as globalisation and international order. Hence, the new regionalism adopts a multi-dimensional multi-actor approach to regionalisation.

The new regionalism, as elaborated in this paper, refers not only to an empirical development but also to new avenues for theorising regionalism. While the new regionalism has received a good deal of scholarly attention in recent years, its full potential remains to be investigated. Not enough effort has been devoted to mapping the new regionalism as an analytical framework for the comparison of different regions and the elaboration of the determinants of regionalism. Notable exceptions in this context are the writings of Björn Hettne and Frederick Söderbaum who can be regarded as the founding fathers of the new regionalism approach (Hettne and Söderbaum 2002).

At the same time new regionalism is developing, the academic field of European studies is witnessing the rise of new concepts and paradigms breaking the hegemony of the intergovernmentalist/ neofunctionalist debate. The field of European studies has made particular progress in this respect. For the purpose of the current paper only network and multilevel governance approaches will be highlighted.<sup>4</sup>

Multilevel governance and network literatures overcome the trappings of state-centrism and supranationality and focus on the relationships between private and public actors linked in complex processes of regional governance and networks. Regionalisation and integration are seen as the result of complex interactions and negotiations between various actors at different levels of governance. Within this context, particular emphasis is placed on the functional operation of different administrative levels within the

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<sup>4</sup> It is by no means intended, however, to suggest that other theories such as new institutionalism are less important.

EU (Benz and Eberlein 1998; Perkmann 1999; Jordan 2001). The institutional arrangements within a multilevel governance framework can be understood as a network of horizontal and vertical linkages that connect local, regional, state and European authorities. Multilevel governance approaches are an explicit attempt to underline the complexities of EU policy-making processes by emphasising variability, multi-actorness and unpredictability (Rosamond 2000: 111).

Although multilevel governance approaches focus mainly on the European experience, there is no reason why the fundamental concept behind such an analysis could not be applied to understanding other regional structures. The main problem is that most multilevel scholarship has pointed out the benefits of comparing EU policy-making processes to those of Western nation-states and, hence, tends to focus on the state-like features of the EU. However, the emphasis is not so much on particular policy-making procedures or state-like features of regionalisation but in the ability of multilevel approaches to examine the interaction of various actor groups, public and private, at different levels of analysis.

Multiple levels of interaction and multi-actorness offer a framework for the use of network analysis (Rosamond 2000:111). Networks have become increasingly fashionable objects of study as new forms of social, political and economic organisation. Network approaches share the concept of a network as a set of relatively stable relationships which are non-hierarchical and interdependent, linking a variety of actors who share common interests with regard to certain policies and who exchange resources to pursue these shared interests, acknowledging that co-operation is the best way to achieve common goals (Börzel 1997). Transnational linkages and networks are decisive factors in the dynamics of regionalisation processes. Regionalisation is viewed as a complex and multi-faceted process involving formal integration and regionalisation, through conscious decision-making at the political and institutional level, and informal integration/ regionalisation (Bressand and Nicolaidis 1992: 29; Keohane and Hoffmann 2002).

While multilevel governance and network approaches are well able to describe policy-making and institutional structures within the EU framework they leave little room for more holistic understandings of regionalism. In addition, such efforts appear to focus on the European process and are based on *sui generis* assumptions regarding European integration. That, however, will ultimately impede efforts to generate a more comprehensive theoretical framework of regionalism. The comparability of the EU or European integration with other regions or other regionalism is implicitly and explicitly denied. However, by assuming regionalism as a general worldwide phenomenon, which comes in many shapes and forms, comparative studies may be able to uncover general principles and factors driving regionalism, thus shedding more light on European integration. Also, by removing European integration from its international historical socio-political context, European studies runs the risk of overemphasising endogenous determinants of integration.

The new regionalism, on the other, would benefit from paying sufficient attention to the European process. After all, as an empirical trend the wave of regionalisation known as 'new regionalism' originated in Europe with the Single European Act. In addition, how credible can general explanations of regionalism be if they fail to explain the European phenomenon?

The new regionalism is currently undergoing a period of explicit revision. Scholars such as the main theorist of the new regionalism approach Björn Hettne himself (2003) and Warleigh (2004) dispute the intellectual distinction, arguing that much can be gained from overcoming the artificial divide. The overall aim of this paper is to make a timely contribution to this debate. The following sections will introduce a revised new regionalism framework combining new regionalism scholarship and elements of European studies for the study of regionalisation. In a next step this framework will be applied to conceptualise the construct 'region' paying particular attention to comparability.

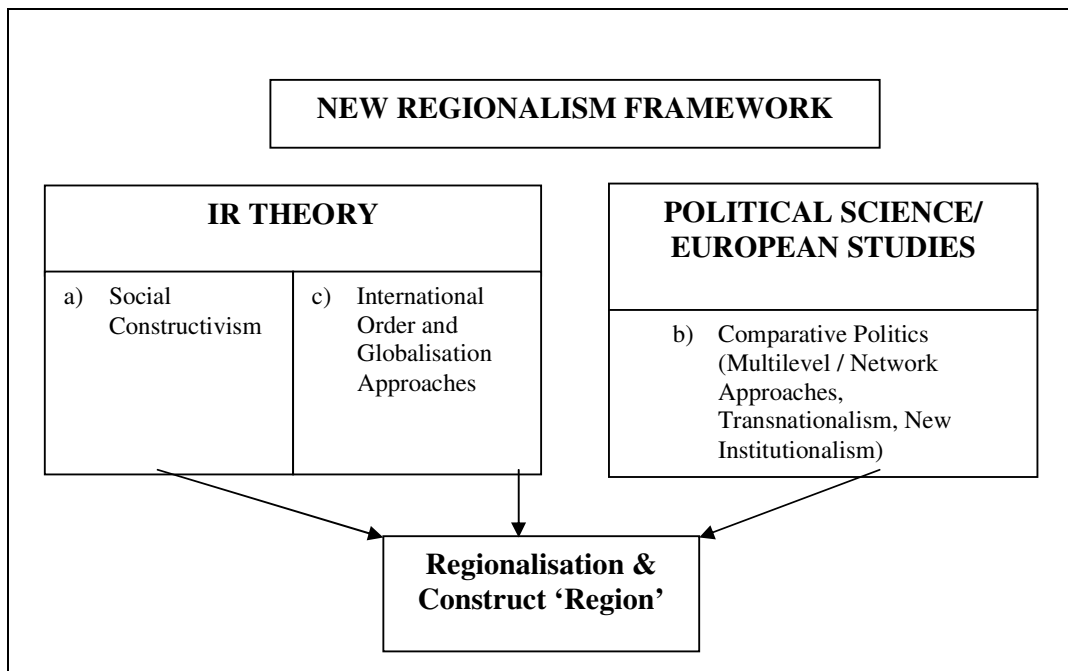
*New Regionalism – A Framework for Analysis*

The new regionalism suggested in this paper is a flexible, dynamic and holistic framework that is not exclusively based on the European experience but aims to analyse regionalism worldwide. Regionalisation is regarded as a comprehensive multidimensional multi-actor process including not only trade and economic developments but also environmental, social policy, cultural, identity and security issues. Regionalisation does not take place in an international vacuum. Regionalism forms part of a global structural transformation in which non-state actors are also active and operate simultaneously at several levels of international relations (Hettne 1996: 9-11).

The new regionalism framework links international relations theory and new advances in European studies. It uses constructivist ontologies and, thus, highlights the importance of ideational factors. It also emphasises the importance of historical analysis for the study of regionalisation processes. The historical, political and social construction of regionalisation is central to this approach (Schulz et al. 2001: 14). The new regionalism approach explicitly aims to place regional developments in a wider international context. Therefore, it will be necessary to elucidate scholarship on globalisation and international order and relate it to the new regionalism framework. Furthermore, the connections between the new regionalism and comparative studies will be elaborated. In this regard the figure below illustrates the theoretical pillars of the new regionalism framework, which will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections, culminating in the conceptualisation of the construct 'region'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See also Hettne's and Söderbaum's model who described their meta-theoretical postulates as global social theory, social constructivism and comparative regional studies. These postulates are applied in theorising 'regionness' as a concept to 'investigate the state of regionalisation in various dimensions and contexts and to compare various situations' (Hettne and Söderbaum 2002: 35).



**Theoretical Foundations of the New Regionalism Approach**

#### *New Regionalism and Social Constructivism*

Constructivist ontologies provide in many ways the main explanatory pillar for the new regionalism approach. In that respect the new regionalism is a framework for the analysis of international relations rather than being restricted to the study of a particular region.

Constructivism generally rejects rational theories of international relations, which explain regional processes and international co-operation with the help of strategic interests and relative gains and losses. Interests and preferences are determined through processes of interaction; they are socially constructed. This implies that conditions such as anarchy at the international level and security dilemma situations are not inevitable but are socially constructed and, therefore, can be de-constructed (Wendt 1992). Although the behaviour of international actors is influenced by the international system it is also the behaviour of these actors which is reproducing the conditions characterising the international system.

The notion of identity is an important concept in discussing the formation of a region. The multiple identity framework is of particular interest here with regard to collective regional identities. For the construction of such an identity some form of binding element is needed. Examples are a common culture, a common ethnic background, shared linguistic similarities, common experiences, a common heritage, shared norms, principles and values. Most of these components are also useful for the formation of national identities. For the formation of regional identities many different national and cultural identities have to be taken into consideration. However, cultural and other collective identities do not have to be the same. The diversity of cultures, languages and ethnic groups, which are characteristic of many regional entities, do not necessarily pose major obstacles to the formation of regional identities.

Identities provide the crucial link between the structure of the international or regional environment and the interests of the various actors and the formation of policies. These actors and their policies determine the form, shape and structure of international and regional settings but, on the other hand, the same settings influence the behaviour, the capabilities, the definition of identities and interests as well as the very existence of international agents (Jepperson et al. 1996: 41).

Identities form and generate interests since many interests depend on the construction of some kind of self-identity in relation to others. Consequently, actors can develop interests in enacting or developing particular identities. The commitment to a configuration of certain sets of identities, therefore, reinforces the acceptance of certain norms and, in turn, affects the normative structure of regional relations. Examples are cases of regional co-operation within trade and security regimes or regional arrangements such as the EU or ASEAN. The policies and actions of actors such as, for instance, nation-states, are influenced by the perception of self-identity and national interests. They also re-produce and re-construct constantly the cultural and institutional structure of the international system.

The importance of norms and rules has also been indicated in the academic discussion of regime theory (Keohane and Hoffmann 1991; Keohane 1984; Krasner 1983; Breckinridge 1997). Social constructivism allows for a deeper impact of norms on regionalisation and international order. Norms and rules can usually be defined as collective expectations for proper behaviour given certain circumstances. Norms have a regulatory character, as argued by neoliberal regime theorists. Hence, norms establish expectations about who the actors are in international relations and how they might behave (Jepperson et al. 1996: 54). Norms become rules in the form of institutionalised procedures and are at the heart of all international regimes and regional arrangements. They therefore influence the institutional structure of international and regional order and constitute and shape the basic identities of international actors (Jepperson et al. 1996: 58). Norms can go even further and generate a re-definition of actor interests and identities, including collective identities of regional organisations (Acharya 2001: 4). In a relatively recent work Amitav Acharya describes the crucial role that norms play in socialisation processes among states which form security communities (Acharya 2001: 17). These socialisation processes may even result in the breakdown of security dilemma situations among those states. The key point is that norms, as well as material factors, regulate the behaviour of international actors. They describe the regulative cultural content of international politics while identities are regulative accounts of the international actors themselves (Kowert and Legro 1996: 435).

Norms and identities also shape and form the instruments that actors and agents have at their disposal. Furthermore, they shape the awareness and acceptance of methods and technologies, which are available and acceptable to achieve certain objectives. The acceptance of international and regional norms, such as the acceptance of certain human rights, diffuse and change theoretical constructs like sovereignty. To summarise, the web of implicit and explicit norms shape identities, interests and available instruments of public and private actors and are imperative for our understanding of regionalisation processes. This links to the debate surrounding the 'new

institutionalist' approach to the study of the EU since it highlights the existence of 'micro regimes' within institutions and EU policies (Aspinwall and Schneider 2001).

### *Multilevel and Network Approaches*

As just outlined, the social constructivist block of the new regionalism grants explanatory power to non-material factors such as identities, norms and principles. However, these factors are not floating freely but are bound to a multitude of actors at different levels of international relations. While constructivism is becoming an ever more popular paradigm in the academic field of international relations, another body of scholarship is evolving which analyses regionalisation as evolving systems of multilevel governance. Multilevel governance and network approaches have been developed with the idiosyncrasies of European integration in mind. They are capable of dealing with the interconnectedness and interdependence of institutions and actor-groups within political and regulatory decision-making processes that are typical for EU policy-making (Marks et al. 1996; Hooghe and Marks 2001; Richardson 1996). Multilevel governance approaches emphasise the multi-dimensional interaction of economic, political and social actors and, accordingly, frame structures such as the EU as 'a system of complex, multi-tiered, geographically overlapping structures of governmental and non-governmental élites' (Wessels 1997: 291). Multilevel approaches widen the spectrum and regard regionalisation as open-ended processes involving sub-national, national and international actors from all sectors of political, social and economic life. Vertically (between various levels of competence) and horizontally (across different levels of governance, economic and social life) interconnected institutions and other actors operate at regional, national and sub-national levels in an interactive process that engulfs macro-regionalisation as well as devolution and micro-regionalisation trends. This process is characterised by intensive vertical and horizontal networking and results in the emergence of different and relatively new modes of regionalisation -co-operative networks, hierarchy and competition- (Falkner 1997). Multilevel and network approaches have the potential to transcend

the state-centric focus on governments and analyse public and private aspects of governance and networks as well as formal and informal, institutionalised and non-institutionalised structures within the same framework. This is of particular interest with regard to the globalisation process which is weakening the distinction between the domestic and international spheres.

Two questions arise here: How are constructivist ontologies with their particular emphasis on identities linked to multilevel approaches with their focus on actors and interests? And, second, how useful are multilevel approaches outside the EU context? The first question addresses a fundamental problem of constructivism. One of its central concepts, identity, is very broad and difficult to conceptualise. It would be very difficult to make a direct link between identities and issue-specific policies that are imperative for understanding some aspects of regionalisation. Here, the interest based notions of multilevel approaches work much better. However, those interests should not be taken as externally determined or static. Constructivism helps us to understand how identities, norms and principles shape interests and, subsequently, regionalisation processes. As for the second question, it is useful to point out once again that multilevel concepts help us to focus on the interactions of a variety of actors, public and private, at different levels of analysis. Network approaches in particular have been applied to regionalisation in the Asia-Pacific (Katzenstein 1997). Furthermore, globalisation has resulted in the creation of an international system of multilevel governance through the establishment of international organisations and regimes at the global, the regional and the transnational level. Regional networks and forms of regional governance are emerging throughout the contemporary international political economy. This process can be observed not only in the three core areas (Western Europe, North America and the Asia-Pacific) of regionalism but also in Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America.

To sum up, constructivist ideas and multilevel approaches to regional integration and co-operation indicate that regionalisation is a multi-faceted multi-actor process where forces and agents from the economic, the social

and the political arenas interact with each other at the local, the regional and the international level. They are, therefore, central to the new regionalism framework. While constructivism primarily focuses on the dynamics of norms and identity-formation, the building block of multilevel governance and network approaches analyses policy- and decision-making and governance structures at the international, the national and sub-national level of political, economic and social interaction. The new regionalism suggests the synthesis of multilevel concepts with constructivist ontologies.<sup>6</sup> While the latter provides the explanatory element and emphasises the importance of ideational factors, the former provides a descriptive account of how these factors are applied as interests at various levels of global and regional interaction.

#### *New Regionalism and the International System*

Most authors would agree that among the primary characteristics of new regionalism scholarship is the analytical focus on a broad range of actors (institutionalised and non-institutionalised) as well as the need to refer to exogenous factors. Regionalisation is closely linked with international order, as giving structure to an anarchical international system, and the globalisation process, either as a consequence of or a reaction to it. Subsequently, the linkages between these concepts and regionalisation need to be taken into consideration. In this respect, the paper follows Hettne's and Söderbaum's call for a global social theory (Hettne and Söderbaum 2002: 35).

Regionalism and international order are heavily interconnected. In fact, regionalism can be interpreted as a conceptual entry into the problem of international order at a regional level. International order at its very basic level is concerned with the political, economic and social organisation of the international political economy. It can be understood as the result of international summits or the outcome of lengthy processes by which principles and rules of conduct and behaviour are agreed and implemented. It is a set of norms, arrangements, regimes and institutions on an international scale

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<sup>6</sup> It, therefore, aims to link international relations theory and European Studies to allow for a more comprehensive and holistic approach.

which regulates the relations between international actors and, in time, alters the attitudes of the decision-makers (Krause 2000: 3, 5). Defined in this way international order is a dynamic process shaped by a multitude of actors including, among others, national governments, state institutions and agencies as well as a huge variety of non-state actors. International order has an instrumental character. It describes the relations between various international actors who introduce structure into their relations. International order is not universal but always limited to the acceptance of the actors involved. Order is not restricted to co-operation but can also be enforced by more powerful actors. Consequently, order is not power-free.

The term 'international order' in itself can be misleading. There is no single overarching international order enforced by coherent global or international institutions. At best, there is a network of overlapping relationships between various international actors who have introduced a number of international and regional regimes, arrangements and rules of conduct to bring order into their relations. These actors form linkages of all kinds and the resulting networks range from international banking, trade and market networks, economic and military interdependencies, labour and political migrations, international standards and regulations, intellectual and information exchanges, multilateral treaties, multinational corporations, energy and technology flows, to religious missionary movements, advertising media, and consumer movements (Frederic and Wakeman 1990: 32). Furthermore, international order is not static but a dynamic and historical process and, therefore, it is being formed, re-shaped and transformed constantly. The term international order refers then to a set of arrangements which are closely related to each other and dominate the relations among public and private international actors. It describes an amalgam containing different sectors of international life ordering economic, security, political and civil relations among a critical mass of international actors. It describes '*specific solutions* to the problem of world order at a particular point in time: world orders are historical' (Spindler 2002: 9).

The current international environment is characterised by a multitude of forces. Among them are those which can be attributed to the globalisation process and its consequences are of crucial importance for the development, politics and analysis of international relations. Indeed, the analysis of post-Cold War regionalisation processes and international order cannot be separated from the globalisation process. This refers to questions such as whether regional trade arrangements are protective measures or initiators of ever increasing freer global trade (Hveem 2000; Sideri 2000; Mittelman and Falk 2000). Another point of view understands regionalisation and integration as a way of 'negotiating' globalisation (Scholte 2000). Some scholars interpret regionalisation processes as the creation of social buffers against the potentially disruptive and disturbing effects of globalisation (Hettne et al. 1999; Schultz et al. 2001). Like globalisation, regionalism is a comprehensive, multidimensional and multifaceted phenomenon, taking place simultaneously at several levels of political, social and economic interaction. Furthermore, globalisation and regionalism are both driven by a multitude of actors. Globalisation is a strong and in some dimensions an irreversible process, which is transforming and influencing the political, social and economic space of international relations (Krause 2000: 10).<sup>7</sup> This has implications for regionalism.

Globalisation generates the penetration of previously sovereign space and increasingly puts the effectiveness of territorial governance based on exclusive national sovereignty in question. Hence, a crucial precondition of the Westphalian system has been removed. At the same time it would be premature to consider the nation-state obsolete. Regionalism occupies an important dimension between Westphalian and post-Westphalian rationalities. Regionalisation processes have a spatial component, combining integrative and disintegrative elements. Internally they mean closer co-operation and collaboration among a well-specified group of actors. Externally, regionalism implies the identification of insiders and the exclusion of outsiders and has the intrinsic potential of enhanced protectionism. With regard to globalisation, regionalism can be either offensive or defensive. As

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<sup>7</sup> For a good definition of globalisation see David Held (1997: 2).

one group of authors put it, globalisation and regionalism have a symbiotic relationship. Sometimes they are working against each other, at other times they are mutually reinforcing (Hettne et al. 1999). The forces of globalisation enable a maelstrom of non-governmental actors, networks and institutions to get involved in previously exclusively governmental actor dominated policy-making processes. Regionalisation driven by globalisation forces can, for instance, imply the rise of so-called 'region states' (Ohmae 1996; 1999). These regions can lie within the territory of a nation-state (sub-national regions), straddle national borders (cross-border regions) or, in some instances, formally combine several states such as in the case of NAFTA, ASEAN or the EU.

### **Towards a More Comprehensive Conceptualisation of the Construct 'Region'**

The next and final section will elucidate how these foundations can be applied for the conceptualisation of 'regions' and regionalisation. Particular attention is paid to the utility of the revised new regionalism for the comparison of different regions and regionalisms. Comparative approaches are often subject to criticism from area studies specialists for overlooking cultural, social and historical contexts for the sake of comparison. However, careful generalisations are needed for theory-building, and comparative analysis helps to prevent ethnocentrism or an undue overemphasis on cultural explanations.

The definition of what constitutes a particular region for comparative purposes is fraught with difficulty. A region can be empirically identified with data on mutual interactions, similarities of actor attributes, and shared values and experiences (Väyrynen 1997: 9). Geographical proximity is one of the main determinants in forming a region. Apart from that, many scholars insist that the members of a region also share cultural, linguistic, economic or political ties (Mansfield and Milner 1999: 591). The main problem is to identify the distinctiveness of a particular geographic area as a unit characterised by enhanced political, economic and social interaction. This relates to the

question of how different a certain region is with respect to other geographical entities or the international political economy in general.

One of the foremost theorists of the new regionalism approach, Björn Hettne, identifies five degrees of 'regioness'. First, a region is a geographical unit. Second, it is a social system, implying translocal and transnational relations between different actors and agents. These relations constitute a security complex in which the actors are dependent on each in terms of their own security. Third, regions can be characterised by organised co-operation in economic, political, social or military fields. In this case, a region is defined according to members of the organisation in question. Fourth, a region as a 'civil society' can take shape when the organisational framework facilitates and promotes social communication and values throughout the region. And, fifth, regions can emerge as collective or international actors in their own right with a distinct identity, actor capabilities, and a certain degree of legitimacy and decision-making structures (Hettne 1996). This represents a hierarchical step-by-step development process and implies a shift of levels of authority away from the national level. In principle two directions are possible for this shift of decision-making power, authority and identification away from the state: either to the supranational or to the sub-national level. Although this model presents an interesting possibility to look at region-building and offers the opportunity to classify several types of regions, it is unsatisfactory for comparative purposes.

The starting point for our conceptualisation is that regions, very much like nation-states, are not permanent fixtures of international relations but historical, cultural, political and economic structures, which change in form and function over time. Boundaries of regions are always fluid and arbitrary (Väyrynen 1999: 6). They are imagined constructs depending on social interaction and on the actors involved in the regionalisation process and evolve in particular socio-political contexts. The paper, therefore, challenges the rigid and often problematic conceptualisation of regions according to the rationalist tradition. There are no 'natural' regions for political scientists (Ravenhill 1995: 181). The definition of what constitutes a specific region is,

therefore, self-determined by the actors and participants involved in region building.<sup>8</sup>

The constructivist and multilevel foundations of the new regionalism suggest that regions are forged and constructed by the application of the different norms, principles, identities and imaginations of the various actors involved in regionalisation processes. These actors face each other at the international, the regional and the national levels of international relations and can be broadly categorised into state actors and non-state actors. State actors include nation-states and, at a lower level, their administrative frameworks and agents, while non-state actors combine, for instance, such bodies as national and multinational enterprises, non-governmental organisations or different pressure, lobby and interest groups. These actors are imperative to understanding regionalisation. Their interests, identities, norms of conduct and relations among themselves have a substantial impact on the shaping of regional structures.

The constructivist building block of the new regionalism approach points to the importance of cognitive and ideational factors in regionalisation processes. Thus the new regionalism framework allows us to conceptualise the construct 'region' by its perception by outsiders as a regional (group-) actor and by its internal (regional) identity as a relatively distinct economic, political and social unit. It follows that the concept 'region' is based on ideational factors and, like any identity, has an external and an internal dimension. This refers to the identity of a region which creates the basis for its global presence. External perception can be understood as international recognition, whereas the internal regional identity refers to a set of explicit and implicit norms, procedures, principles, values and self-imagery which defines the region in question.

The parallels with national identities are obvious. In the current international system states have to be recognised by other states. Nation-states, therefore, find part of their identities in the face of other states. National identities on the

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<sup>8</sup> This actors in turn are subject to historical, socio-political and economic contexts.

other hand provide also an internal dimension. After all the concept of nationality implies that citizens identify with a particular political entity.

The concept 'region' defined in the manner suggested above applies, in particular, to political regions with some form of institutionalisation. Political regions in this context can be interpreted as distinct notions of collective identities based on certain norms, principles and socio-political histories. This in itself would not be enough to fulfil the conditions of the introduced definition: the concept of identity implies a sense of categorisation and a sense of difference. Identity formation requires an external dimension in order to distinguish between in- and outsiders. Through the establishment of formal political structures, regions internalise their identities among their constituent members. In addition, formal institutional structures enable regions to be recognised as such by extra-regional actors. At the same time it is important to recognise the whole variety of non-institutionalised regions at the micro and macro level. This, by no means, entails a downplaying of informal regions. In fact, they can be perceived along the same lines.

Finally, after dwelling on the concept 'region' let us turn our attention to regionalisation. The literature often makes a distinction between regionalisation and regionalism. Regionalism represents a general phenomenon, denoting formal projects and processes. It also refers to a body of norms, values, objectives, ideas and a type of international order (Schulz et al. 2001: p. 5). The empirical process of regionalisation, on the other hand, depicts a multidimensional process of intra-regional change that occurs simultaneously at several levels of social, political and economic interaction (Hettne 1999). Different processes of regionalisation at different levels of interaction converge in the making of a region. Economic, political and social forces come together in aligning and shaping a set of new collective norms, principles and identities at the regional level (macro or micro) while altering established interests, norms and identities at the same time. Regionalisation is rarely an isolated process and must be regarded as driven by complex socio-historical processes and exogenous factors. It, therefore, has to be understood in its historical and international context. It is a strategy which is

pursued, actively as well as unintentionally, by state and non-state-actors across several levels of social, political and economic interaction.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to sketch the theoretical foundations of the new regionalism framework, outlining the linkages between new advances in European integration and new regionalism scholarship. This bridge has been demonstrated by the application of this framework for the conceptualisation of the construct 'region' defined by its extra-regional perception and regional identity and of multi-dimensional regionalisation processes shaped by endogenous and exogenous determinants and socio-political histories. It thus, combines elements of both traditions and provides the theoretical toolkit enabling a meaningful comparison between different regionalisation processes and regions such as, for instance, the EU and ASEAN, without the teleological prejudice that progress in regionalisation has to be achieved along the lines of European integration. It de-emphasises the idiosyncrasies of individual regionalisation processes and argues instead that regionalisation is a complex, multi-faceted, socio-historical, multi-actor process that cannot be separated from developments at the wider international level. The usefulness of such a comparison, especially involving the EU as a comparator have recently been outlined by Warleigh (2004: 304-306).

The new regionalism framework is only the latest development in a long tradition. It incorporates many elements of earlier frameworks such as, for instance, functionalism and neofunctionalism. It emphasises multiple centres of authority at different regional levels of governance. Like neofunctionalism, the new regionalism research programme aims to develop a more general theory of regionalisation and regionalism. In addition to its focus on regionalisation as a process, the new regionalism offers the opportunity to analyse regions as the momentary outcomes of such processes. However, whereas traditional theories of regional integration and co-operation have

been too focused, too static or simply failed to grasp the novelty of regionalisation as a fundamental part of international transformation processes and change, the new regionalism approach represents an analytical framework for the understanding of contemporary regionalism. It helps to understand the revival of regionalist tendencies in terms of the creation and regeneration of regional institutions and regimes. The new regionalism agenda has to be understood as part of a wider research programme concerned with exploring and explaining the popularity of regional co-operation in the contemporary international political economy. The framework must be seen in conjunction with a development in international relations to move beyond rationalist ontologies and theoretical parsimony to proceed towards a more comprehensive social science. This is reflected in its emphasis on norms and identities. Indeed, the historical, political and social construction of regions is central to the approach (Schulz et al. 2001: 14).

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