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## Regionalism, globalism and complexity: a stimulus towards global IR?

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### ABSTRACT

The growing complexity in international politics sheds new light on an old concept – that of regionalism. Regionalism has been studied in terms of integration and cooperation, in the broader context of the establishment of multilateral liberal networks and the promotion of globalisation processes. But the concept of regionalism is dramatically different today, with regions and regionalism taking a quasi-autonomous role in shaping global policies and in addressing several issues and areas previously tackled in the framework of global multilateral institutions. Building on the existing literature, the main assumption of this paper is that regionalism as a set of policies and economic measures could be considered as an obvious output as well as a consequence of a strategic path-breaking behaviour adopted by international actors in the context of a changing global world order. In order to understand and to cast this regional dynamic properly, it is necessary to depart from the traditional Western-centric materialist and rationalist mainstream theories towards a more cross-fertilising, pluralistic methodological toolbox able to explain the dynamics governing a ‘world of regions’.

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## Introduction

The scholarly debate around regionalism and globalism has made clear how international relations (IR) as a discipline needs to be shaken from its foundations. The main evidence in favour of this view is the discipline’s reluctance to broaden its theoretical toolbox in order to deal with the growing complexity of international politics. Although many scholars and researchers have begun to enquire into new ways of pushing IR beyond its Western political and philosophical roots, it remains a relatively underdeveloped field of research, which is detrimental to the scientific advancement of the discipline.

In recent times, the debate has been pushed a step further. The issue at stake is not the ‘decolonisation’ of IR from its existing Western-centric approach. Rather, it is the inclusion of non-Western ways of thought within its theoretical field at a time when Western countries are losing their primacy in world politics.

Complexity in international politics urges researchers to acquire new attitudes towards social and political phenomena, given that they are shaped from social interactions.

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However, problems arise when dealing with the subject of regionalism and how it relates to globalisation. This last is the ultimate stress test for IR, with different theoretical approaches producing different results and different policy outputs. It is clear that traditional Western theoretical approaches share a bias in their political and philosophical roots which prevents them from performing a 'neutral' analysis of ongoing phenomena. What IR actually lacks is an adequate level of pluralism, which translates into a rather 'monodirectional' theoretical approach. This is the consequence of the relatively Anglo-American dominance in worldwide scientific cognitive processes, as well as the Eurocentric Westphalian bias in considering international politics. The low level of interaction between Western and non-Western scholars and the consequent lack of confrontation between the different schools of thought both prevent IR from taking the necessary next step for a more fruitful evolution towards the adoption of a global IR framework.

Following on from its title, this paper is divided into two sections. The first section will address the topics of regionalism, globalism and complexity, in that order. In particular, the aim is to highlight how complexity as a causal factor can influence the rise and development of various regionalism(s) and their functional relation with globalism. Complexity is also the key link to the second section, which is again divided into three parts. Considering the various dynamics inspiring and determining the direction of the ongoing regional processes, the second section will focus on the development of the debate in IR, from International Political Economy (IPE) to the Comparative Approach. The final aim is to support the view that in order to understand current regionalism(s), they deserve to be studied accurately in terms of the factors from which they arise, rather than the outputs they produce.<sup>1</sup> That would be a promising field of study in which, possibly, comparative methodology would find its space to obtain fruitful results in terms of theoretical dialogue and plurality.

### **The rise and relevance of regionalism(s)**

Regionalism is a trend worldwide that has originated in the aftermath of the World War II. Since then, regionalism has gradually evolved through two distinct periods, the Cold War period and the post-Cold War period. During each period, regionalism has been influenced by the political and ideological contexts of the time. The Cold War period was marked by bipolar confrontation and the building of regional blocs. The post-Cold War period produced an international system characterised by substantial shifts in global power distribution and the obviation of the need to build regional blocs for political purposes.

Post-Cold War regionalism featured the revival of old regional organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), as well as the birth of new ones such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR).

The 40-year period of the Cold War limited the autonomous development of regional integration processes due to the political necessity of building alliances with one or the other of the two superpowers, and the superpowers' need to shape their spheres of

influence according to their economic and political projects. It limited as well the efficacy of multilateral negotiations within existing international organisations such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). The Uruguay Round, specifically, showed how the bipolar confrontation hampered multilateral trade negotiations that pivoted around the interests of the United States during the 1980s, and of the triad of the United States, the European Community and Japan in the early 1990s.

Once the Cold War was over, the international system underwent a radical systemic change. The variation in global power distribution, one of the most relevant systemic shifts that took place, freed new spaces for autonomous initiatives in regional integration processes. The absence of an East-West confrontation brought international actors – both state and non-state – to think about the challenges and opportunities for their economies represented by access to the international market through the implementation of regional projects. The steady resurgence of the European Integration Process, backed by a strong political project well illustrated in the White Paper presented by Jacques Delors in 1985, led countries from South Asia and Latin America to be concerned about their capacity to keep themselves viable in international relations and in joining international markets. The same concerns, under the shadow of Fortress Europe,<sup>2</sup> can be considered as the main driver for the negotiation of NAFTA, through which the United States set its own conditions for its economic power re-assessment at the regional level. The earlier inward-oriented growth strategies shifted towards outward-oriented growth strategies. To this extent, the emergence of collective regional projects was functional and aimed at gaining access to international markets within an international context significantly marked by the growth of relevance of the private business sector. This evolution was possible also because of the growing interdependence fostered by economic and financial globalisation processes, coupled with the necessity for private and state actors to keep pace with the fast-changing conditions of economic openness, economic interlinking and growing competition,<sup>3</sup> and to reassess their position within the international system.

### **What drives what? The issue of dependent and independent variables**

One of the most debated topics in regionalism scholarship is whether regionalism is driving globalisation or the other way round, and to what extent, and whether they are opposed or concurrent phenomena.

Regionalism can take place under two forms of cooperation and integration processes, depending on the degree and deepness of the actions. The scope and quality of the various regional processes that have been carried out after the end of the Cold War vary greatly with respect to Cold War regionalism. The difference is found mainly in the primary goal of the regional organisation. During the Cold War, regional organisations' primary goals were mainly of a commercial nature, whereas afterwards, regional organisations started to assume a plurality of function, including but not limited to commercial ones. This specificity is strictly related to the great variety and differentiations existing among the various forms of regionalisms, which encompass a plurality of dimensions that make each regional organisation different.<sup>4</sup> Among existing regional experiences, it is possible to differentiate between loose and tight organisational frameworks, depending on the degree of institutionalisation and on the legal structure governing the implementation of that specific regional process.

As Quermone<sup>5</sup> highlights, the degree of institutionalisation and the existence of a legal framework help in discriminating between cooperation and integration regional processes. The European Union (EU) is a bold example of an integration process, while other regional experiences can be considered to be based mainly upon cooperation, due to the loose nature, or even the absence, of an institutional framework. This variety points directly to the changing nature of regionalism, depending on the geographic, historical and cultural context in which it takes place.<sup>6</sup> Latin American, African or Southeast Asian regionalism, for instance, does not encompass integration processes like those of the EU. Notwithstanding the relatively high pace at which they developed in the post-Cold War era, they are nonetheless characterised by different internal degrees of cooperation. These differences are reflected in the way these regional groupings take part in the global interplay in the international economy, revealing as well the geopolitical ambitions hiding behind those initiatives. The failure of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TTP) and its subsequent evolution as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) is an example of how the negotiations for a mega-trade agreement could reveal specific and divergent preferences among similar actors.

In the case of the TPP, the negotiations have been carried out among the 21 APEC countries.<sup>7</sup> The original rationale for the US to join the TPP was mainly of a geopolitical nature, given the considerable political leverage it would have given to the US in terms of being able to contain China. President Donald J. Trump withdrew from the TPP because of concerns about the possible effects on the US economy in terms of loss of jobs, growth of internal inequality and possibilities for unfair currency manipulation by its partners. To this extent, Trump ignored any geopolitical considerations in keeping to the TPP, valuing more the domestic preferences of several sectors of the United States' societal and economic environment. On the other hand, the South Asian APEC countries came out so heavily in favour of the TPP that it evolved into the CPTPP, without the participation of the United States. Notwithstanding the similar preferences of the CPTPP partners with regard to trade liberalisation and formal institutionalisation, they came to different conclusions about the advantages and disadvantages presented by the TPP. It is likely that the Asian APEC countries valued the counter-China effect of the CPTPP, a deal covering a region where 40 per cent of world trade takes place, more than the US did. Moreover, the retreat of the US meant the removal of restrictive intellectual property and investment provisions from the treaty, which is beneficial for such outward-oriented countries as the South Asian APEC members. For the US, the focal point was that the deal would not have enabled it to become the sole rule-maker of twenty-first century globalisation in the Asian region.

The TPP case shows well how regionalism, besides the integration-cooperation bifurcation, encompasses many dimensions, varying from geopolitical concerns to historical and cultural factors. In the case of APEC, but also within other regional groupings like NAFTA, MERCOSUR, ECOWAS and ASEAN, the interplay of these factors can easily affect the degree of economic openness, depending on the economic sector involved. Nevertheless, all these regional projects are eagerly committed to open regionalism and free trade development, with a strong emphasis on general tariffs reduction. In a counter-intuitive way, even the recent moves made by the US in selectively raising tariff barriers against specific economic sectors and specific exporting countries signals a strong commitment to free trade and open regionalism in that it results in a strategy aimed at

obtaining political results by limiting the benefits of taking part in a global integrated market.

This movement towards the progressive reduction of tariffs worldwide and the integration of world markets is nothing but the continuance of the original project enucleated after World War II and rooted in the Bretton Woods system. Differently from the past, however, today's regionalism is growingly directed towards the creation of regional economic spaces and towards the integration of these spaces within the more complex web of the globalised economy. Thus globalisation seems to be a constantly existing reference in every national political decision-making agenda, considering that every regional economic agreement, be it a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) or a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), as well as the foundational principles of each regional grouping are all structured around the idea of coping with international economic competition. This common ground is particularly manifest in how the activities of International Multilateral Institutions (IMIs) influence regional policies, to the extent that most economic reform processes are carried out under the auspices of global financial institutions like the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These two institutions, which most notably embody the neo-liberal philosophy underlying the concept of globalisation, have played and still play a substantial role in addressing each country's needs in terms of fiscal, economic and structural adjustments in order to be integrated in the globalised economy. Moreover, contrary to the view that regional arrangements are detrimental to the progression of globalisation,<sup>8</sup> they see regional associations as an opportunity to implement structural and fiscal reforms with a higher level of efficiency.<sup>9</sup>

From an epistemological point of view, it looks like the classic neo-liberal ideational framework inspiring the concept of globalisation<sup>10</sup> drives most part of the regional initiatives undertaken by political decision-makers. To this extent, regionalism today can be understood as a product of the neo-liberal ideational framework underlying globalisation, both in terms of adherence to its inspiring political values and as a phenomenon that reinforces globalisation by reproducing its foundational logic in the implementation of specific regional arrangements.

## Regionalism and complexity in global affairs

While regional dynamics have grown vigorous in the post-Cold War world order, it is nonetheless true that the power shifts that are occurring within the structure of the international system contribute to adding complexity to the international framework.

Notwithstanding the commitment of regional experiences to keep on the globalisation track, it is nonetheless true that this relationship of mutual influence is neither linear nor peaceful.

As stated above, regionalism contributes to reinforcing globalisation processes and, at the same time, globalisation's political neo-liberal core principles guide national decision-makers in how they deploy their regional policies. However, structural systemic changes come with growing difficulties in managing international affairs globally just like during the Cold War era.

The main factor that is accounted for here as an element of systemic change is changing power balances worldwide. Changing power balances, as highlighted before, have heavily

affected the capacity of IMIs to cope with the issuance of a coherent international political agenda. It has compromised as well the possibility of a fair representation at the international multilateral level of all the different interests and needs arising globally and involving new and rising powers. This circumstance has been perceived by many national decision-makers as an opportunity to regain relevance in the international economic arena, mainly because of the possibility offered by regional processes to recast their policy design activities in a more coherent response to their economic needs.<sup>11</sup>

In this framework, complexity arises when the international power structure is no longer able to support a specific path of development – one of political neo-liberal globalisation. As affirmed before, regionalism seems to be supportive of globalisation in that existing regionalist theories subsume and reproduce the main economic understandings underlying neo-liberal paradigms. At the same time, it is much more difficult to affirm that all the ongoing regional processes and the neo-liberal paradigm share the same views in terms of political, and not economic, values for a globalised world.

Until the end of the Cold War and during the early 1990s, the political and economic capitalist model of development gained worldwide diffusion thanks to the supportive role exerted by the US political hegemony.<sup>12</sup> The main chains of transmission of this model were located at the level of the IMIs, where the unilateral attitude of the US favoured the spread of the 'Western' model of development and the diffusion of Western political norms and values.

The systemic change that has affected the distribution of global power since the second half of the 1990s, coupled with the progressive inability of IMIs to proffer proper responses to emerging international crises, has led to the American hegemony losing its grip over the international system, and fostered the emergence of new and divergent visions about how to manage international relations. The point here is very subtle for the main divisive argument is not on globalisation *per se*, but on Western models of globalisation.

The rise of nationalist and populist movements can be a revealing element of this tendency in that they reflect the willingness of national governments to bring back the political power at a national level, even by questioning the legitimacy of certain international institutions,<sup>13</sup> but without veritably questioning the endurance of existing regional processes. The main call, in some cases, is for a 'deglobalisation' of international affairs, but it comes with a substantial regional repositioning of groups of countries, competing amongst themselves in an effort to create stronger regional economies of scale so that they can gain better positions in the global market economy.<sup>14</sup>

As Acharya has pointed out,<sup>15</sup> the international system is moving towards a 'Regional World', meaning that the broader globalisation process is being questioned in its substance rather than in its nature. In a changing power distribution structure, the point at stake is which interests should be taken into consideration for the construction of a globalised market economy, and what political values should be considered as relevant in order to build it.

The Chinese experience, for instance, is revealing in this regard because China promotes its own regional economic initiative without pushing for substantial political reforms or alignments with its partners. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the flagship project of this regional economic initiative and it can be considered a strategic initiative from the political point of view to the extent that it tries to counter the American 'Asia

Pivot'. In parallel, it aims at promoting a 'regional economic space with Asian characteristics', where 'dialogue prevails over confrontation' and where the 'zero-sum game Cold War mentality' does not apply.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, the Indo-Pacific strategy supported by US President Trump with the active engagement of Japan, India and Australia is aimed at circumventing China's effort to develop a strong political and economic influence over the region, and it mainly serves US interests in affirming its role of rule-maker in every aspect of the globalisation process. The Indo-Pacific strategy could be seen as a 'second-best' option to the main TPP strategy rejected by Trump. In this case, the very core of the issue is the creation of two stumbling blocks within the Asian region, each possessing very different views about the role of the state in governing the economy, and about financial deregulation and different approaches to national political reforms.

This example helps in understanding how complexity works in current international relations and how it defines the functional relationship between regionalism and globalism.

In this specific case, two regional processes are at work, and though they are both directed at building a regional cooperation network for economic development purposes, they are opposed in what concerns their respective political dimensions and, more specifically, about the rules and norms that should govern the next wave of globalisation.

Complexity thus explicates its effects in the way different 'regionalisms' foster economic and political cooperation or integration at a 'sub-global' level to let their members reposition themselves within the broader global economic system.

This inhomogeneity of visions came to light, from the theoretical point of view, because of the flourishing of non-mainstream (that is, non-Western) theoretical approaches to the study of regionalism as well as the criticism of mainstream theories.<sup>17</sup> The proliferation of such criticism highlighted the increasing scepticism regarding the traditional liberal understanding of regionalism as espoused in the Western theoretical tradition.<sup>18</sup> A growing strand of literature is focusing on the regional experience put in place by authoritarian governments.<sup>19</sup> This scholarly research is committed to assessing how, by establishing regional initiatives, authoritarian and illiberal governments and states succeed in promoting their norms and values and in acquiring legitimacy at the domestic and regional level.

This process, which resulted in a diversified and inhomogeneous growth of different regionalisms across the globe, made some scholars think that historically aware and methodologically solid comparative regionalism is 'a field whose time has come'.<sup>20</sup> Comparative regionalism is perhaps the most promising direction taken by IR as a discipline 'since the late 1990s, and after a slow start dominated by single or parallel case studies, comparative analysis has now become one of the most important trends in the contemporary study of regionalism'.<sup>21</sup>

### **From new regionalism to the comparative approach: the recent evolution of a discipline**

As a concept, regionalism can assume various meanings depending on: (1) the point of view of the researcher; (2) the discipline under which it is studied; and (3) the reasons why the investigation is being carried out. To date, research about regionalism has produced three consecutive 'waves' of regional studies. However, due to nature of the concept of region, I will not discuss here the evolution of the research findings across all the



'waves'.<sup>22</sup> This is due to the 'changing' nature of the meaning of 'region', which progressively moved from a rather geographical connotation to a more nuanced, multilevel conceptualisation where geography, economics, actors' agency and community building play a substantial role in shaping the regional dimension. The changing nature of the meaning of 'region' is due as well to the strict interdependence between theories of regionalism and the political context in which these theories are developed. Neo-functionalism, for instance, emerged in a context of deep scepticism towards the concept of the nation-state after the devastation brought to the European continent by two world wars. Today, neo-functionalism is still relevant in explaining a great part of the European integration process,<sup>23</sup> but it falls short of arguments when it is applied outside the European continent to explain non-Western regionalism. What is of great interest for this paper is the fact that IPE has acknowledged regionalisation trends as being qualitatively new and tried to frame them through multidimensional analysis. The concept of regionalism thus cannot be separated from the concept of region. According to Nye, a region is made of a reasonable number of states sharing geographical boundaries and having an adequate level of interdependence.<sup>24</sup> For Cantori and Spiegel, regions are made of states sharing cultural, historical, ethnical, linguistic and social bonds.<sup>25</sup> Hurrell adds to the concept economic complementarity and organisational homogeneity.<sup>26</sup> At present, the concept of region as a community is perhaps the most adequate, where geographical boundaries are not really an obstacle to the establishment of permanent relations between states, whether they are territorially contiguous or not.

Regionalism presents fewer problems in defining it because it aligns to the political level and refers to the tendency of organising the world in different regions. Its political content resides in states' authority to fulfil national interests. However, it is actually difficult to frame regionalism as an autonomous concept due to its strict interdependence with globalism.

The common view on this point is unequivocal. Regionalism and globalism could be both opposing and complementary phenomena, counterbalancing or completing each other.<sup>27</sup> The real problem is one of an ontological and epistemological nature: it all depends on the content assigned to regionalism and globalism and to the way (theory) in which they are posed in a relation of mutual dependence.

The debate in IPE has highlighted this last point, with reference to the different evaluations made by neo-liberals and IPE scholars with respect to regionalism. Neo-liberals consider regionalism as a kind of new protectionism, opposed to the broader integration dynamic fostered by globalisation. According to neo-liberal understanding, regionalism is a form of political intervention adopted by state regulators in order to counterbalance the loss of centrality by the state, and is thus opposed to globalisation and growing market integration. The main neo-liberal argument is that growing levels of market integration naturally lead to higher levels of political integration, guaranteeing higher political, juridical and economic standards within states and across the 'international society of states'. By interpreting regionalism in this way, neo-liberals attach greater importance to globalism not only as a defined set of policies implemented through multilateral institutions, but as an interpretative framework which has great impact from the epistemological point of view. Notwithstanding, neo-liberal analysis has a precise ontological understanding of regionalism, which is considered as only a 'second-best' option to be adopted in those cases where globalisation fails. On the opposite side,

there is the IPE approach where regionalism is conceived as a complementary dynamic to globalisation.

As mentioned before, IPE defines new regionalism as qualitatively new, to the extent that it involves a broad set of actors and is conditioned by market dynamics and societal, cultural and organisational factors. What for neo-liberals is the second-best nature of regionalism is for IPE scholars the very nature of the regional dynamics.<sup>28</sup> According to IPE, regionalism has a completely different ontological content: it is complementary to globalisation and it works in the same direction as globalisation by addressing issues that globalisation itself fails to address. Framed thus, regionalism is not opposed, but complementary, to free trade and global openness and works to foster both of them. For this reason, new regionalism often refers to the concept of 'open regionalism',<sup>29</sup> and is understood as a different way of implementing the globalisation process.

New regionalism, to this extent, shows a brand new understanding of the concept of region by attaching greater importance to the non-state-centric origin of regions and, thus, it offers new conceptual frameworks for the study of regionalism. One of the most important features of this new understanding of the meaning of region is its social and not material foundation. In other words, regions are not given entities, they are not bounded by either geographical or political limitations or predetermined 'regional interests'.<sup>30</sup> Instead, regions are the product of social interactions and inter-subjective dynamics that produce new social meanings. Notwithstanding the evident constructivist footprint of this approach, the great merit of new regionalism is that it detaches the concept of region from a state-driven perspective, pushing it towards a more nuanced dimension of continuous 'regional shaping'. From this perspective, regions are shaped by political interactions among non-state actors, community builders and, in general, regional political builders.<sup>31</sup>

## Towards new trends in IR?

The turn in the debate brought about by the New Regionalism Approach (NRA) greatly contributed to pushing the argument even further towards the necessity to adopt a brand new theoretical and conceptual framework to study the ongoing process of regionalism, in a changing context characterised by the end of the Cold War and the purported American unipolar moment.

Today, the debate pivots around concepts like post-neo-liberal regionalism,<sup>32</sup> regional worlds,<sup>33</sup> post-hegemonic regionalism<sup>34</sup> and porous regional borders.<sup>35</sup> The variety of definitional options clearly shows how and to what extent regionalism is a living reality in contemporary world politics, giving weight to the argument that regionalism as a concept is strictly tied to the political context in which it takes shape.

If we consider contemporary trends, it is possible to think about regionalism as a process leading to regions' globalisation, regional world order, 'regional Worlds'<sup>36</sup> or *globalisation by other means* (emphasis mine). A common trait of almost all ongoing regional projects is not a desire for regional retrenchment, but, rather, a common will for growing regional integration, mainly from the organisational point of view, to enjoy the economic and market advantages offered by globalisation. Undoubtedly, this is a new form as well as a new approach to globalisation, which implies a troubled political coordination with the Western agenda-setters of the original globalisation project. The

problem, which is surely the most major challenge of this century, is to find a way, once again, to detach the investigation around regionalism and globalism from the Western materialist and rationalist (and purely Eurocentric) logic, and find a more coherent and fitting analytical framework for it. For instance, China's push to propel itself onto the international politics stage is motivated by its growing dissatisfaction with the current world order, and this has the spillover effect of giving voice to all those who are dissatisfied with that order.<sup>37</sup> The resistance and inability of traditional multilateral institutions to accommodate the requests of emerging countries for the reform of institutional decision-making processes (notably the World Bank and the IMF) can be imputed to inadequate understanding of contemporary processes. It is the result of the application of purely Western-centric analytical and theoretical frameworks, which do not properly take into account the needs and interests of the rest of the world. In this context, China's behaviour is one among many examples to the extent that it offers some new elements to understand the content and the scope of contemporary regionalism from a different point of view.<sup>38</sup> One of the most striking features of China's behaviour is that, framed within the East Asian regionalism, it does not inhibit that regional grouping from joining the network of global interdependence. This evidence is part of the broader systemic conditions in which regionalism(s) develop today.

Contemporary regionalism takes place under very different conditions from those considered by the NRA. The world today is shaken by continuous financial instability, threats from non-state actors and transnational criminal actors, environmental degradation, climate change, demographic crises and other phenomena that can hardly be governed at a global multilateral level.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, in open contrast to the reality investigated by the NRA, it is hardly disputable today that regions are a reality of world politics and that they 'are increasingly fundamental to the functioning of all aspects of world affairs from trade to conflict management, and can even be said to now constitute world order'.<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless, the focus of the debate on the functional relation between contemporary regionalism and globalism has changed. Given the multidimensionality and complexity of current regionalism, the debate is now stressing the importance of the intertwining interactions between state and non-state actors, as well as the qualitative difference occurring in interactions at different levels depending on the selected field.<sup>41</sup> Contemporary regionalism has come up with a broad variety of agencies and changing structures, which applies to various policy areas that are selectively addressed at the regional or global level, depending on the specific conditions of the regional area in which they take place.

This is particularly evident in the fields of monetary policy,<sup>42</sup> environmental policy,<sup>43</sup> migration policy<sup>44</sup> and, in the case of emerging countries, development policies,<sup>45</sup> in all of which notable and important initiatives are being taken, especially through the establishment of new multilateral development banks.

### **The qualitative difference of a post-NRA approach**

After the end of the Cold War, there was a rapid growth in scholarly research that focused on new regionalism. The main feature of this new body of literature was the application of constructivism to a broad set of unexplored issues like the role of non-state actors in the development of new regional experiences, or the study of the role played by norms' socialisation processes in the creation of new regional orders. Notwithstanding the

moderate degree of eclecticism put forth by these new studies in combining critical and traditional approaches to IR, it is difficult to refer to 'new regionalism' as a general theory, or at least as a comprehensive theory of regionalism as a whole. Constructivism, on its part, further developed the understanding of emerging regional processes, through Alexander Wendt's seminal work,<sup>46</sup> and it had far more success in finding application outside the European experience in addressing regional developments in a non-Western world. With its stress on ideational and normative content, constructivism is openly opposed to the neo-liberal and neo-functional focus on material and rationalist elements, introducing the value of identitarian, normative and ideal factors in the study of regionalism. Constructivism has given weight to these factors in explaining why a regional process emerges, and it has provided an interpretive framework in which norms and ideas overwhelm material factors like the amount of free trade or the effectiveness of collective defence arrangements in assessing the performance of a regional institution creation process.

The circumstance that material factors are the hard ground on which neo-liberal and neo-functional institutionalism evaluate the success of regionalism enabled constructivism to find a large field of applications outside the Western world, and in particular outside the very specific and 'biased' field of European regionalism. Regional experiences like ASEAN, ECOWAS and the Arab League do not find an effective explanation in the traditional Western rationalist and materialist frameworks, in that these regional experiences seem to be driven by identity and cultural factors and the formal institutions they have created are not consistent with rationalist and materialist theories like neo-liberalism and neo-functionalism.<sup>47</sup>

In turn, constructivism has its own weaknesses when it comes to dealing with cultural biases. The very strength of the constructivist approach – the stress on norms and ideas – is at once its main weakness. Just to be objective, the main field of application of the constructivist approach is still the Western European integration process, in particular, the domain of European identity consolidation and the international diffusion of European normative and ideational content. Constructivist scholars generally suffer from a 'biased' approach to the issue of norms in that they start from a very liberal-democratic background in assessing which norms are more effective in starting, through their diffusion, the construction of political communities outside the Western world. When it comes, for instance, to evaluating convergence processes among non-European states, constructivism tends to underestimate the value of non-Western agencies and structures and to overvalue the role of traditional liberal-democratic norms and values in institution-building processes outside Europe.<sup>48</sup> This weakness often leads to the consideration that non-Western community building experiences fail to duplicate the European model. This point is particularly evident and openly debatable with respect to regionalism as applied to non-liberal communities. If one were to consider the scope and aims of the European integration process, one would admit that they were by and large defined by a shared underlying political culture among the Western European states. Thus, European integration studies obviously investigated the European integration process from a liberal-democratic point of view and through the lenses of Western cosmopolitanism, a scheme that is clearly unfit to be applied outside the European context.

The point at stake is that non-Western regionalism and regional institutions show extremely different features from EU and Western regionalism as it emerged after the Cold War and evolved in the early 2000s.

Non-Western regionalism is generally filled with sovereignty concerns and a preference for boundary preservation, while regional institutions in those areas show a tendency towards low levels of formality, light bureaucracies and non-binding outcomes.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, it is possible to find substantial differences in non-Western regionalism, which testify to the high degree of 'volatility' in the existing regional experiences and the different scopes for which they evolved.

East Asian regionalism, for instance, has evolved in an opposite way from the EU regional integration process. While in Europe the institution building process led to the structuring of regionalism and later ignited the regionalisation of trade and economy, in East Asia regionalism arose only after that a regionalisation process was at work. Chinese economic predominance, revealed by the power exerted by the Chinese state and private corporations in structuring a regional network of trade and businesses, led to the construction of regional institutions like the ASEAN. Asian regionalism is very concerned about preserving state sovereignty, a specificity that translates into the adoption of generally shared consensual decision-making procedures within ASEAN, as well as into the Asian anti-collective defence norm, showing a strong preference towards non-binding institutional outcomes and a loose concern over 'democratization'.<sup>50</sup> Conversely, experiences like the African Union and ECOWAS show extremely low levels of regionalisation and a high degree of regionalism, which translates into a positive orientation towards humanitarian interventions, human rights preservation and the promotion of democracy, paired with a declining concern over the inviolability of colonial boundaries.

Differences among regionalisms, as well as the emergence of a number of experiences different from the European one, show that structural changes are at work within the international system. Today, regionalism is not so much about trade liberalisation and the promotion of democracy, nor it is geared towards security goals. Growing complexity in the international system is seemingly driving regional integration and cooperation processes towards new frontiers of activity that are substantially different from those addressed by the European integration model. Climate change, refugee flows, financial volatility and non-state groups indulging in transnational criminal activities are all areas that go beyond the scope of traditional theories of regionalism, which are focused on economic integration and security.

Moreover, today, regionalism proves to be successful even when it takes qualitatively different directions than those described in traditional theories. The idea that Asian regionalism is going through a 'gold era' of illiberal state-led capitalism testifies to the non-universal applicability and validity of traditional Western theories based on market-driven and liberal democratic approaches to regionalism. Perhaps, instead of stressing the theme of global convergence, a new, necessary theoretical approach to regionalism should be that of recognising the existence of multiple localised regionalisms and regional organisations, each with its own specificities. One focal point for the new approach in the study of this qualitatively new regionalism should be that of setting aside many of the concerns about (typically Western) norms diffusion and convergence of models, instead attaching more value to the specific conditions leading to the emergence of regionalism and to the creation of regional institutions.

In other words, what would provide a great boost to regionalism studies is to abandon the universal claim of traditional IR theories and to admit that convergence and diffusion occur successfully only when they fit the aims and scope of the specific ongoing regional

integration or cooperation process. This approach broadly corresponds with the 'subsidiarity and localization' theories<sup>51</sup> which constitute a tentative effort to explain why diffusion processes succeed or fail. Moreover, an approach focused on regionalism localisation would be of great use to address all those trajectories of non-Western regionalism that diverge from the European experience. While the European integration process, today, has a substantially different pace in terms of the depth and degree of integrationist pushes towards a more pronounced sovereignty pooling attitude among Western European states, other experiences worldwide are lagging well behind. Take, for instance, once again, East Asian regionalism, where post-colonial nationalism is the main driver for ASEAN policies and where the 'member states have acted selectively in line with their "cognitive priors" about state sovereignty'.<sup>52</sup> This experience is clearly inconsistent if compared to many of the rationalist and materialist mainstream theories of IR, but turns out to be very coherent if localised in the Asian context, where sovereignty preservation concerns prevail over supra-national integration and regional security considerations.

The most direct consequence for a new trend in IR theorising about regionalism should be then to leave aside the 'one size fits all' matrix and admit the possibility of the existence of different regional integration and cooperation paths with respect to the EU benchmark.

## Conclusions

Regionalism today is no longer a tool to promote market liberalisation or prevent interstate conflicts. Growing complexity in international affairs, together with a relative decline of the political and economic weight of the West as compared to the rising rest, has made regionalism a more suitable tool to address the broad set of problems arising in various fields. The flourishing of regional experiences around the world depicts this reality, as it does the variety and complexity of the developmental paths that form part of these experiences. Global power shifts are responsible to a certain extent for the direction taken by some regional experiences worldwide, and are the reason why regionalism today comes with a variety of specific norms and standards, depending on which part of the world it takes place.

Regionalism is a continuously changing phenomenon, and its dynamicity is reflected in the way it relates to the broader process of globalisation as well as in the way it evolves in concert with changing domestic economic and political conditions. Rather than regionalism being guided by globalisation, the relationship between the two can be said to flow in both directions. Global trends can be affected by the way in which different regional groupings interact amongst themselves, and global trends also hold the potential to influence the direction of regional experiences, in particular at the level of the selective acceptance of certain functional norms and values.

Today, the great challenge in the study of regionalism is not so much to develop a single comprehensive theory of regionalism as to shape a coherent methodological framework that will enable dialogue between the different theoretical approaches pertaining to different study areas. The focus, in other terms, should not be on the outputs of regionalism(s), but on its sources. This would be an optimum starting point from which to depart from the Eurocentric normative approach that has so far dominated the study of regionalism, and to delineate a more consistent theoretical understanding of the roots of the various regional experiences worldwide.

To this end, the comparative approach has the potential to develop new and valuable insights for the discipline.

The answer to the question if IR is moving towards a 'global' evolution mostly depends on the mental attitude of the researcher. The success of this task largely depends on the recognition of the current world order as a pluralistic one in which regions and regionalisms move along a continuum of interdependence and autonomy.

Moreover, this move towards a more comprehensive approach to IR study would help us to prevent another, perhaps bigger, mistake. The fact that IR theory has been too Western-centric does not mean that we have to dismiss 'the West' in favour of 'the non-West'. In other words, the challenge is to make all possible efforts to shape a 'worldly' approach to IR theory in which new emerging agency structures should be given more weight and in which world politics should be understood in terms of social, cultural and economic interactions within the human community.

## Notes

1. Mansfield and Solingen, "Regionalism".
2. Gamble and Payne, "Conclusion".
3. Solingen and Malnight, "Globalization, Domestic Politics and Regionalism".
4. Marchand et al., "The Political Economy of Regionalisms".
5. Quermone, *Le système politique de l'Union Européenne*.
6. Warleigh-Lack, "Studying Regionalisation Comparatively".
7. Japan, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, Peru, Mexico, the United States and Canada.
8. Sapir, "The Political Economy of EU Regionalism".
9. Phillips, "Latin America in the Global Political Economy".
10. Higgott, "Mondialisation et gouvernement".
11. Telò (ed.), *European Union and New Regionalism*.
12. Saull, "Rethinking Hegemony".
13. Niblett, "Liberalism in Retreat".
14. Jean, "La démondialisation n'aura pas lieu".
15. Acharya, "Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds".
16. Xi, "China's Xi Jinping Says Tariffs on Car Imports Will Be Cut this Year".
17. Fioramonti, "Regionalism in a Changing World".
18. Fawn, *Globalising the Regional, Regionalising the Global*; and Paul (ed.), *International Relations Theory and Regional Transformation*.
19. Libman and Obydenkova, "Understanding Authoritarian Regionalism".
20. Acharya, "Comparative Regionalism".
21. De Lombaerde et al., 'The Problem of Comparison in Comparative Regionalism'.
22. For a deep and extended analysis about the state of the art in regional studies, refer to Hettne, "Beyond the 'New' Regionalism"; Katzenstein, "A World of Regions"; and Söderbaum, *Rethinking Regionalism*.
23. Mattli, 'Ernst Haas's Evolving Thinking on Comparative Regional Integration'.
24. Nye, *Peace in Parts*.
25. Cantori and Spiegel, *The International Politics of Regions*.
26. Hurrell, *Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective*, 38.
27. Hettne, "Beyond the 'New' Regionalism."
28. Laursen, *Comparative Regional Integration*; and Soderbaum and Shaw (eds), *Theories of New Regionalism*.
29. Gamble and Payne, "Conclusion," 251.
30. Söderbaum, *The Political Economy of Regionalism*, 2–3.

31. Neumann, "A Region-Building Approach."
32. Riggiozzi, "Region, Regionness and Regionalism in Latin America."
33. Acharya, *The End of American World Order*.
34. See above 11.
35. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions*.
36. See above 33.
37. Kupchan, 'After Pax Americana.'
38. Callahan, "Chinese Visions of World Order"; Hopewell, "The Liberal International Economic Order on the Brink"; and Subacchi, "Currency in Progress and Governance in Transition."
39. Van Langenhove, *Building Regions*; and Hoffmann, "Inter- and Transregionalism."
40. Fawn, "Regions and Their Study," 5.
41. Baert et al. (eds), *Intersecting Interregionalism*; and Shaw et al. (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Regionalisms*.
42. McNamara, "Regional Monetary and Financial Governance."
43. Haas, "Regional Environmental Governance."
44. Lavenex et al., "Regional Migration Governance."
45. Bruszt and Palestini, "Regional Development Governance."
46. Wendt, "Social Theory of International Politics."
47. Acharya, *Whose Ideas Matter?*; Kacowicz, *The Impact of Norms in International Society*; and Hemmer and Katzenstein, "Why Is There No NATO in Asia?"
48. Risse, "Social Constructivism and European Integration"; Checkel (ed.), "International Institutions and Socialization in Europe."
49. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions*; and Acharya and Johnston, *Crafting Cooperation*.
50. Jetschke and Katada, "Asia," 236.
51. Acharya, "Norm Subsidiarity and Regional Orders."
52. Jetschke and Murray, "Diffusing Regional Integration", 174.

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