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The Problem of Comparison in Comparative Regionalism*

Philippe De Lombaerde, Fredrik Söderbaum, Luk Van Langenhove and
Francis Baert †

Abstract

There is virtually no systematic debate regarding the fundamentals of comparative research in the field of international regionalism. The research field is very fragmented and the lack of interaction between EU studies and regionalism in the rest of the world is stark. There is also a lack of communication between scholars from various theoretical stand-points and research traditions. Related to these two divides is the tension between idiographic and nomothetic analysis. The purpose of this article is to contribute to this largely neglected debate on how to conduct and address three interrelated problems: a conceptual, a theoretical and a methodological one. Our claim is that the future of comparative regionalism should be one where jointly old divides are closed and new frontiers are crossed. This requires a combination of more conceptual rigor, theoretical eclecticism, and sounder empirical research methods.

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Introduction¹

Since the mid-1980s there has been an explosion of various forms of regionalism on a global scale. The widening and deepening of the EU is the most pervasive example, but regionalism is also made visible through the revitalisation or expansion of many other regional projects around the world. Today's regionalism is characterised by the involvement of almost all governments in the world, but it also involves a rich variety of non-state actors, resulting in multiplicities of formal and informal regional governance and regional networks in most issue areas. As such regionalism is closely linked with the shifting nature of global politics and the intensification of globalisation.

The pluralism and multidimensionality of contemporary regionalism gives rise to a number of new puzzles and challenges for comparative politics. Cumulative knowledge has grown within the study of regionalism during the last two decades, the institutional design of numerous regional organisations, and the relationship between globalisation and regionalism. However, the challenges and weaknesses in the study of regionalism are primarily related to the fragmented nature of this research field, in particular the weak debate around comparative analysis. Despite a growing number of specific comparisons of selected aspects of regionalism (especially regarding regional institutions and the role of power) in selected regions (particularly in the Triad), there is virtually no systematic debate regarding the fundamentals of comparison. We do not attempt a detailed empirical comparison of a set of pre-defined regions according to a fixed set of variables; the purpose of the article is instead to contribute to this much-needed and largely neglected discussion. We distinguish thereby three interrelated problems: a conceptual problem (what are we studying?), a theoretical problem (which theoretical framework to use?), how should theories be transplanted to other contexts?, and a methodological problem (how to use the case-study method?, how to use quantitative methods?).

Early and recent debates on comparative regionalism

The research *problématique* that we touch upon is not different in nature compared to other specialisations in the social sciences. What justifies this article is the fact that the role of comparison is underdeveloped in the field of regionalism compared to most other (sub-) fields of study.

The early debate on regionalism in the 1960s and 1970s was always centred on the European integration process, and the European experience was in many ways treated as a single case, even if many of the most influential neofunctionalists (which was the most influential school of thought) were also engaged in comparative research. Haas, Schmitter and Dell studied regional integration (or the lack of it) in Latin America.² Etzioni compared the United Arab Republic, the Federation of West Indies, the Nordic Association and the European Economic

¹ First drafts were presented at the February 2008 international conference on *Comparative Regionalism: Europe and East Asia*, organised by BISA, Renmin University of China, Peking University and UNU-CRIS in Beijing and at the September 2008 3rd GARNET Annual Conference on *Mapping Integration and Regionalism in a Global World* in Bordeaux. The authors would like to thank the organisers of both events, in particular: Xiaojin Zhang, Zhengyi Wang, Xinning Song, Daniel Bach, Olivier Costa and Firmin Mbala. For constructive comments, we would also like to express our gratitude to H el ene Gandois, Sieglinde Gst ohl and the reviewers of the journal.

² Ernst B. Haas, and Phillippe C. Schmitter 'Economics and Differential Patterns of Integration. Projections about Unity in Latin America', *International Organization* 18:4 (1964), pp. 259-299; Phillippe C. Schmitter, 'A Revised Theory of Regional Integration', *International Organization* 24:4 (1970), pp. 836-868. Sidney Samuel Dell, *A Latin American Common Market?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966)

Community.³ Nye studied East Africa and conducted comparisons of the Arab League, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Organization of African Unity (OAU).⁴ With a few exceptions, however, and due to the perceived lack of regional integration elsewhere, most scholars lost their interest in regionalism outside Europe.⁵

Neofunctionalism came under critique by intergovernmentalism. Haas responded to critics by labeling the study of regional integration ‘pre-theory’ (on the basis that there was no clear idea about dependent and independent variables), then referred to the field in terms of ‘obsolescence’, and ended up suggesting that the study of regional integration should cease to be a subject in its own right.⁶ Rather, it should be seen as an aspect of the study of interdependence. Nye also underwent the same shift of interest. In retrospect it would appear that the neofunctionalists expected too much too quickly. They underestimated the anti-pluralist, centralist and nationalist orientations of their time, at the same time as the theory had relatively little regard for exogenous and extra-regional forces.⁷

In the real world, the 1970s was a period of ‘Eurosclerosis’ within the European Communities. Elsewhere, attempts to create regional organisations were failing and most of these organisations fell dormant. Nevertheless, the 1985 White Paper on the internal market and the Single European Act resulted in a new dynamic process of European integration. This was also the start of what has often been referred to as the ‘new regionalism’ on a global scale. Naturally, this attracted a lot of interest in the late 1980s and early 1990s. What was striking, though, was the lack of correspondence in this respect between economics and political science. To some observers regionalism was ‘new’, mainly in the sense that it represented a revival of protectionism or neomercantilism.⁸ But most observers highlighted the fact that closure of regions was not on the agenda, rather, the current regionalism was to be understood as ‘open regionalism’.⁹ In the field of international relations the studies of this so-called ‘new regionalism’ considered new aspects, particularly those focused on conditions related to what increasingly came to be labeled globalisation. According to this type of scholarship there are many ways in which globalisation and regionalism interact and overlap in contrast to the dichotomy of regionalism as a stumbling-block or a building-block.¹⁰

One of the prominent scholars of the recent debate, Björn Hettne, emphasises that regionalism needs to be understood both from an exogenous perspective (according to which

³ Amitai Etzioni, *Political Unification: A Comparative Study of Leaders and Forces* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965)

⁴ Joseph S., Jr. Nye, ‘Comparing Common Markets: A Revised Neo-Functionalist Model’, *International Organization*, 24:4 (&970), pp. 796-835; Joseph S. Nye, *Peace in Parts: Integration and Conflict in Regional Organization* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971)

⁵ Exceptions are: Werner J. Feld and Gavin Boyd (ed.), *Comparative Regional Systems. West and East Europe, North America, The Middle East, and Developing Communities* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1980); Joseph Jamar (ed.), *Intégrations régionales entre pays en voie de développement* (Bruges: De Tempel, Tempelhof, 1982)

⁶ Ernst B. Haas, ‘The Obsolescence of Regional Integration Theory’, *Berkeley, CA: Institute of International Studies working paper*, 1975

⁷ Shaun Breslin and Richard Higgott, ‘Studying Regions. Learning from the Old, Constructing the New’, *New Political Economy*, 5:3 (2000), pp. 333-52

⁸ Jagdish Bhagwati, *The World Trading System at Risk* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993)

⁹ Kym Anderson, and Richard Blackhurst (eds), *Regional Integration and the Global Trading System* (Harvester: Wheatsheaf, 1993); Vincent Cable and David Henderson (eds.), *Trade Blocs? The Future of Regional Integration* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1994)

¹⁰ Andrew Gamble and Anthony Payne (eds) *Regionalism and Global Order* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996); Björn Hettne, Andras Inotai and Osvaldo Sunkel (eds.) *Globalism and the New Regionalism* (Macmillan, 1999); Mary Farrell, Björn Hettne and Luk Van Langenhove (eds), *The Global Politics of Regionalism. Theory and Practice*. (London: Pluto Press, 2005); Andrew .F. Cooper, Christopher W. Hughes and Philippe De Lombaerde (eds), *Regionalisation and Global Governance. The Taming of Globalisation?* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2008). On the building block-stumbling block controversy, see, for example, Jagdish Bhagwati and Arvind Panagariya, *The Economics of Preferential Trade Agreements*, (Washington: AEI Press, 1996), and Sam Laird, ‘Regional Trade Agreements – Dangerous Liaisons?’, *The World Economy*, 22:9 (1999), pp.1179-1200.

regionalisation and globalisation are intertwined articulations of global transformation) and from an endogenous perspective (according to which regionalisation is shaped from within the region by a large number of different actors).¹¹ As mentioned above, the exogenous perspective has primarily developed during the recent debate, whereas the endogenous perspective underlines the continuities back to functionalist and neofunctionalist theorising about the integration of Europe, the role of agency and the long-term transformation of territorial identities. But in contrast with the time in which Haas and the early regional integration scholars were writing, today there are many regionalisms and thus a very different base for comparative studies. It is apparent that neither the ontology nor the epistemology has remained static. One important indication of this is the emergence of a rich variety of theoretical frameworks for the study of regionalism and regional integration. Indeed, current regionalism may be seen as a new political landscape in the making, characterised by an increasing set of actors (state and non-state) operating on the regional arena and across several interrelated dimensions (security, development, trade, environment, culture, and so on). This multidimensionality and pluralism of the regional phenomenon both in Europe and the rest of the world has resulted in the proliferation of a large number of theories and approaches to regionalism. For example, Söderbaum and Shaw's edited collection *Theories of New Regionalism* draws attention to variants of institutionalism, security complex theory, to a variety of constructivist, critical and 'new regionalism' approaches, such as the world order approach (WOA), new regionalism approach (NRA) and region-building approach.¹² Mansfield and Milner's influential book *The Political Economy of Regionalism* highlights a variety of neorealist and neoliberal institutional theories, new trade theories and the new institutionalism.¹³

Laursen's *Comparative Regional Integration*¹⁴ emphasises a variety of governmentalist, power, constructivist, neofunctionalist and historical institutionalist perspectives, whereas Wiener and Diez is a coherent exposé of the richness of *European Integration Theory*, highlighting: federalism, neo-neofunctionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, multi-level governance, policy networks, new institutionalisms, social constructivism, integration through law, discursive approaches and gender perspectives.¹⁵ It is also important to highlight in this respect the leading role played by scholars as Acharya or Katzenstein.¹⁶ Especially their work on regionalism in Asia played a groundbreaking role. Not all work within the field of new regionalism is inherently comparative. One can only argue that since the late 1990s, and after a slow start dominated by single or parallel case studies, the comparative analysis has now become one of the most important trends in the contemporary study of regionalism.¹⁷ But in spite of a growing concern

¹¹ Björn Hettne, 'The Europeanization of Europe: Endogenous and Exogenous Dimensions', *Journal of European Integration*, 24: 4 (2002), pp. 325-40.

¹² Fredrik Söderbaum and Timothy M. Shaw, (eds), *Theories of New Regionalism. A Palgrave Reader* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003)

¹³ Edward D. Mansfield and Helen V. Milner (eds), *The Political Economy of Regionalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); See in this respect also: John Ravenhill, *APEC and the Construction of Pacific Rim Regionalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Vinod K. Aggarwal and Min Gyo Koo (eds), *Asia's New Institutional Architecture. Evolving Structures for Managing Trade, Financial, and Security Relations* (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2008)

¹⁴ Finn Laursen (ed) *Comparative Regional Integration* (Ashgate, 2005).

¹⁵ Antje Wiener and Thomas Diez (eds.) *European Integration Theory* (Oxford, 2003).

¹⁶ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, (London: Routledge, 2001); Amitav Acharya, 'How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism', *International Organization*, 58:2 (2004), pp. 239-275; Peter J. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Vinod K. Aggarwal, Min Gyo Koo, Amitav Acharya et. al. 'Roundtable: Peter J. Katzenstein's Contributions to the Study of East Asian Regionalism' *Journal of East Asian Studies* 7:3 (2007), pp. 359-412.

¹⁷ Walter Mattli, *The Logic of Regional Integration. Europe and Beyond*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press, 1999); Finn Laursen, *Comparative Regional Integration. Theoretical Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Amitav Acharya and Alastair Ian Johnston (eds) *Crafting Cooperation. Regional International Institutions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Peter J. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and*

for comparative (empirical) research, there is no systematic debate regarding the fundamentals of comparison and the conceptual, theoretical and methodological challenges we are facing.

The conceptual problem

One of the biggest obstacles faced by students of comparative regionalism is the conceptual one. There is a wide range of definitions of region, regional integration, regionalism, regionalisation and related concepts in the academic literature. During the early debate about regional integration in the 1960s and 1970s a large amount of research capacity was invested in trying to define regions 'scientifically'.¹⁸ A plethora of opinions were advanced regarding what mutual (regional) interdependencies mattered the most (such as economic, political and social variables, or historical, cultural and ethnic bonds). Definitions are of course essential in comparative research, since the definition and choice of concepts, including the fundamental question of what is a case, will affect the ability to compare and ultimately to generalise. The definition of key variables, such as regional integration and regionalism/regionalisation is of course also important in order to facilitate academic debate. The brave attempts from the 1960s and '70s produced unfortunately little clear result as 'region' is a polysemous concept. Now, the fact that the definition of a *region* 'depends' on the research problem that an individual researcher or a research community is investigating does not mean that defining a region is not possible. But as it is a 'container-concept' with multiple meanings, some conceptual analysis is needed. It also implies that when academics and policy makers communicate about regions (and related phenomena) across paradigmatic or disciplinary borders, concepts should not be taken for granted.

As always, concepts cannot only be understood in terms of their etymological origins.¹⁹ Far more important is to look at the different circumstances in which the policy and research communities use the concept of *region* and to the motives of doing so. In general, regions are referred to in three circumstances: (i) *supra-national regions* (involving a group of neighbouring states), (ii) *sub-national regions* (an entity within an existing state, or (iii) *cross-border regions* (an area that covers a territory that involves parts of at least two countries). This immediately shows that regions are not a natural kind: the concept is used when referring to different phenomena such as the European Union, North-Rhine-Westphalia or the Euregio.²⁰

Historically, the concept of region has evolved primarily as a space between the national and the local within a particular state. These types of regions are referred to as sub-national or *micro-regions*. The concept of region can also refer to *macro-regions* (so-called world regions), which are larger territorial (as distinct from non-territorial) units or sub-systems, between the state level and the global system level. The macro-region has been the most common object of analysis in world politics, while micro-regions have more commonly been considered in the realm of the study of domestic politics and economics. In current international affairs, with blurred distinctions between the domestic and the international, micro-regions have increasingly become cross-border in nature, precipitating an emerging debate about the relationship between macro-

Europe in the American Imperium (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Francesco Duina, *The Social Construction of Free trade. The European Union, NAFTA, and Mercosur* (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005); Mary Farrell, Björn Hettne and Luk Van Langenhove (eds), *The Global Politics of Regionalism. Theory and Practice*. (London: Pluto Press, 2005)

¹⁸ Bruce M. Russett, *International Regions and the International System. A Study in Political Ecology* (Chicago: Rand & McNally & Co., 1967); Louis J. Cantori and Steven L. Spiegel, 'International Regions. A Comparative to Five Subordinate Systems' *International Studies Quarterly* 13:4 (1969), pp. 361-380; Louis J. Cantori and Steven L. Spiegel (eds), *The International Politics of Regions. A Comparative Approach*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970)

¹⁹ Christer Jönsson, Sven Tägil and Gunnar Törnqvist, *Organizing European Space* (London: Sage, 2000), p. 15

²⁰ In this sense social scientist should re-examine the spatial assumptions that are taken for granted. A good starting-point for this debate is the excellent overview of metageographical constructs as East, West, Europe, North, South, etc. done by Lewis and Wigen. Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents. A Critique of Metageography*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997).

regionalism and micro-regionalism within the context of globalisation.²¹ It makes sense to use the generic term of *region* in those cases as it emphasises that there is something in common. This communality becomes obvious when looking at the discursive context in which it is used.²² That context refers to matters of governance, of territory or identity. These matters are also important when referring to states. In other words, calling something a region is done because it emphasises that that geographical area with its attached social community and/or system is not a state while at the same time it can have some statehood properties. As such one can say that in principle every geographical area in the world (with its social system) that is not a state can be considered as a region if to some extent statehood properties can be attributed to it. So, regions can be defined as what they are not: they are not sovereign states. But they have some resemblance of states. If one agrees that the common aspect of all regions is that the concept is used as a discursive tool to differentiate them from states, it becomes possible to define in a more precise way then what makes up a region. This can be done by referring to the concept of *regionhood*: that what distinguishes a region from a non-region.²³

A classical definition of a (macro-) region is, for example, Nye's: "*a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence*"²⁴. The meaning of a number of geographically contiguous states is rather obvious, but Nye recognised that the degree of interdependence could vary between different fields. With this definition as a point of departure Nye could then distinguish between political integration (the formation of a transnational political system), economic integration (the formation of a transnational economy) and social integration (the formation of a transnational society)²⁵

Historically the study of regional cooperation and regional integration has strongly emphasised state- or sovereignty-centred definitions of regions and states as actors, or political unification within formal and macro-regional organisations — although neofunctionalist, institutionalist and especially transactionalist approaches certainly consider the underlying social fabric of non-state actors and interest groups.²⁶ The majority of studies in the research field of comparative regionalism continue to focus on the policies of formal (even formalistic) regionalism as a state-led project in contradistinction to the processes of regionalisation and the processes of region-building.²⁷

²¹ This distinction between the 3 levels of analysis is as equally relevant for the US (the federal states), Europe (the regions) as for other parts of the world. See in this sense: Michael Keating, *The New Regionalism in Western Europe. Territorial Restructuring and Political Change* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1998); Shaun Breslin and Glenn Hook (eds), *Microregionalism and World Order* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002); Markus Perkmann and Ngai-Ling Sum (eds), *Globalization, Regionalization and the Building of Cross-Border Regions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002); Fredrik Söderbaum and Ian Taylor, *Regionalism and Uneven Development in Southern Africa. The Case of the Maputo Development Corridor* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003)

²² Nikki Slocum and Luk Van Langenhove, 'The Meaning of Regional Integration. Introducing Positioning Theory in Regional Integration Studies' *Journal of European Integration* 26:3 (2004), pp.227-252

²³ Luk Van Langenhove, 'Theorising Regionhood' *UNU/CRIS e-Working Papers*, 2003, nr. 1

²⁴ Joseph S. Nye, *Peace in Parts. Integration and Conflict in Regional Organization*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), p. vii

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-7

²⁶ 'Regional cooperation' can be defined as an open-ended process, whereby individual states (or possibly other actors) within a given geographical area act together for mutual benefit, and in order to solve common tasks, in certain fields, such as infrastructure, water and energy, notwithstanding conflicting interests in other fields of activity. 'Regional integration' refers to a deeper process then, whereby the previously autonomous units are merged into a whole.

²⁷ 'Regionalism' represents the policy and project, whereby mostly state actors cooperate and coordinate strategy within a particular region or as a type of world order. It is usually associated with a formal programme, and often leads to institution-building. 'Regionalisation' refers to the process of cooperation, integration, and cohesion creating a regional space (issue-specific or general). "At its most basic it means no more than a concentration of activity — of trade, peoples, ideas, even conflict — at the regional level. This interaction may give rise to the formation of regions, and in turn to the emergence of regional actors, networks, and organisations" Louise Fawcett, 'Regionalism in Historical Perspective', in Mary Farrell, Björn Hettne and Luk Van Langenhove (eds), *The Global Politics of Regionalism. Theory and Practice*. (London: Pluto Press, 2005), p. 25. Andrew Hurrell makes a more nuanced

A rather recent tendency is to place additional emphasis on ‘soft’, *de facto* or informal regionalism/regionalisation, acknowledging the fact that a rich variety of non-state actors have begun to operate within as well as beyond state-led institutional frameworks. For instance, business interests and multinationals not only operate on the global sphere, but also tend to create regionalised patterns of economic activity, which may or may not impact on inter-state frameworks.²⁸ Similarly, civil society is often neglected in the study of regionalism, notwithstanding that its impact is increasing, as evident in the transnational activist networks and processes of civil society regionalisation emerging around the world.²⁹ According to Breslin et al. the distinction between formal and informal regionalism helps “*break out of the teleological shackles of the first wave and may help us to move our focus to different types of regional response [and] to more issue-specific questions*”.³⁰ Another benefit is that the number of cases increases, even if it implies that it becomes much more important to discuss to what extent these cases are comparable or not.

In terms of scale, the large majority of studies in the field of comparative regionalism have conventionally been concerned with macro-regions rather than micro-regions (especially macro- and sub-regional interstate frameworks). This has, at least in our view, led to an under-emphasis of the heterogeneity and pluralism of regions, regionalisms as well as micro-issues ‘on the ground’.³¹ We suggest that students of comparative regionalism should not be concerned solely (or simply) with macro-regions, especially when these are defined as inter-state regional frameworks. It needs saying that micro-level forms of regionalism may sometimes be less formal/inter-state than the formal macro-regions; they may be more reflective of private sector interests than those of either states or civil societies, as in many corridors or triangles. There are many interesting insights to be drawn from various micro-level processes, such as growth triangles and export processing zones (EPZ) in East and Southeast Asia, old and more recent corridors in Southern Africa, *maquiladoras* along the US-Mexico border as well as the Euroregions in Europe.³² In the past, overly sharp distinctions have been made between micro- and macro-regions. But if regions are made up by actors other than states alone, and if even state boundaries are becoming more fluid, then it also becomes more difficult to uphold old distinctions between micro- and macro-regions. In addition, one should not neglect the important differences in geographical scale: both micro- and macro-regions come in different sizes. As such a macro-region (e.g. Benelux) can be smaller than a micro-region (for instance a Chinese province), in terms of population, economic weight or some other measure. Comparative work that covers micro and macro-regions requires definitions that are sufficiently broad as, for

distinction between five different categories of regionalism: (1) social and economic regionalisation, (2) regional awareness and identity, (3) regional inter-state cooperation, (4) state-promoted regional integration, and (5) regional cohesion. Andrew Hurrell, ‘Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective’, in Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell, *Regionalism in World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 39-45

²⁸ Alan M. Rugman, ‘Regional Multinationals and the Myth of Globalisation’, in Andrew .F. Cooper, Christopher W. Hughes and Philippe De Lombaerde (eds), *Regionalisation and Global Governance. The Taming of Globalisation* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 99-117

²⁹ Amitav Acharya, ‘Democratization and the Prospects for Participatory Regionalism in Southeast Asia’, *Third World Quarterly*, 24:2 (2003), pp. 375-390; Alex Warleigh, ‘Europeanizing Civil Society. NGOs as Agents of Political Socialization’, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 39:4 (2001), pp 619-39; Fredrik Söderbaum, ‘Regionalisation and Civil Society. The Case of Southern Africa’. *New Political Economy* 12:3 (2007), pp. 319-337

³⁰ Shaun Breslin, Richard Higgott and Ben Rosamond, ‘Regions in Comparative Perspective’, in Shaun Breslin, Christopher W. Hughes, Nicola Philips and Ben Rosamond (eds), *New Regionalisms in the Global Political Economy*, (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 13

³¹ Fredrik Söderbaum and Ian Taylor (eds), *Afro-Regions: The Dynamics of Cross-Border Micro-Regionalism in Africa* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2008)

³² Markus Perkmann and Ngai-Ling Sum (eds), *Globalization, Regionalization and the Building of Cross-Border Regions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002); Fredrik Söderbaum and Ian Taylor, *Regionalism and Uneven Development in Southern Africa. The Case of the Maputo Development Corridor* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003)

example, those referring to non-sovereign governance systems with (partial) statehood properties. When a focus on macro-regions is preferred, more restrictive definitions can and should be used (see below).

Now, the view that regions must not be taken for granted, taken as pre-defined in advance of research or be reduced to particular regional organisations is particularly emphasised in constructivist and reflectivist/post-structuralist scholarship. It is very obvious that the mainstream conceptualisation where regions are taken largely as given is very different compared to a view that consider regions as social constructions. Representing the latter standpoint, Jessop argues that “*rather than seek an elusive objective ... criterion for defining a region, one should treat regions as emergent, socially constituted phenomena.*”³³ From such a perspective, all regions are socially constructed and hence politically contested. Emphasis is placed on how political actors perceive and interpret the idea of a region and notions of ‘regionness’.³⁴ From this point of view, the puzzle is to understand and explain the process through which regions are coming into existence and are being consolidated — their ‘becoming’ so to speak — rather than a particular set of activities and flows within a pre-given, region or regional framework. Hence, in this kind of analysis, regional inter-state organisations are seen as a second order phenomenon compared to the processes that underlie processes of regionalisation and region-building. Regions are constructed and reconstructed through social practices and in discourse. Calling a certain geographical area a region needs therefore to be seen as a discursive tool that is used to obtain certain goals. It is therefore possible that various regional spaces overlap in territorial terms, and as Neumann eloquently points out, “*multiple alien interpretations of the region struggle, clash, deconstruct, and displace one another*”.³⁵

The tendency to see a pluralism of regional scales and regional actors has led to an increasing pluralism of regional definitions, scales and spaces — mega-, macro-, meso-, sub- and micro-regions — all of which are intertwined with globalisation, inter-regionalism and national spaces. At first sight this perspective appears to be somewhat difficult to reconcile with hermetically sealed and pre-defined regions and regional borders. It may also appear that the constructivist and post-structuralist understandings of regions pose certain challenges for systematic comparison. However, we believe there is no conflict. The path to the future and to increased communication between different theoretical stand-points lies in more precise definitions and increased emphasis on explaining what, exactly, is ‘regional’ and what is not. This can best be done by looking to the different discursive contexts (such as for instance security related discourse or economic discourse) in which references to being or becoming a region occur. Further, in this process it becomes more important to tackle the question of comparability between regions.

A related aspect of comparability is linked to the process characteristics of the regional phenomenon. Regionalisation can be thought of as a long term process of social transformation in which ‘phases’ can be distinguished. These phases can be defined, in turn, in terms of a particular degree of regionness.³⁶ The identification of ‘comparable’ cases should take this into account. Rather than comparing different regionalisation processes in the same historical moment or lapse

³³ Robert Jessop, ‘The Political Economy of Scale and the Construction of Cross-Border Regions’ in Fredrik Söderbaum and Timothy M. Shaw (eds), *Theories of New Regionalism. A Palgrave Reader* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p. 183; See in this sense also Peter J. Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security. Norms and Identity in World Politics.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996)

³⁴ Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum, ‘Theorizing the Rise of Regionness’, *New Political Economy*, 5:3 (2000), pp.457-474; Björn Hettne, ‘Beyond the New Regionalism’ *New Political Economy*, 10:4 (2005), p.548.

³⁵ Iver B. Neumann, *The Region-building Approach*, in Söderbaum and Shaw, *Theories of New Regionalism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

³⁶ Björn Hettne, and Fredrik Söderbaum, ‘Theorizing the Rise of Regionness’, *New Political Economy*, 5:3 (2000), pp.457-474

of time, it might make sense to compare the cases in comparable logical moments or lapses of time.³⁷

It is apparent that different definitions are thus possible and that conceptual pluralism is a logical consequence. Pluralism does not equal anarchy, however: for academic work to be productive, minimal common understandings are necessary. A way forward could be not to spend too much energy on the precise wordings of the definitions but rather focus on the essential characteristics of the regional phenomenon, distinguishing it thus from non-regions. One possibility is the notion of 'regionhood' which sees regions as non-sovereign governance systems with (partial) statehood properties, and macro-regions as non-sovereign governance systems between the national and global level. This can be broad enough to allow for comparative research. One could argue that at least by using the neologism *regionhood*, interaction with contemporary mainstream EU Studies scholars is possible.

However, this is only one possibility. Other possibilities exist. For example, the essential characteristic could refer to the existence of a common identity or social recognition; or otherwise it could refer to the existence of minimum levels of (regional) interdependence, as in the definitions of a security community³⁸, a security complex³⁹, regional orders approach⁴⁰, regional peace and security cluster⁴¹ or an optimum currency area (OCA).⁴² This type of definitions do not refer to sovereignty and, therefore, do not essentially rely on the absence of sovereignty at the regional level. In the definition of OCAs, scale comes before form.

It is therefore recommended to distinguish classes of definitions that are characterised by a 'hard core' consisting of essential elements, rather than to focus on the periods and commas of particular definitions. These hard cores usually refer to internal characteristics: 'regionhood' (statehood properties without sovereignty), identity, institutionalisation, etc., or a combination of these. However, the hard core could also refer to external characteristics, for example: the capacity to interact with other regions and with the global governance level or the capacity to (economically or politically) influence other regions or the global economy or polity. Definitions referring essentially to external characteristics could be called 'exogenous' definitions, as compared to 'endogenous' ones.

It is important to understand the linkage between the conceptual problem and the problem of comparability in empirical research. If the absence of sovereignty combined with supra-nationality are considered essential characteristics of a (macro-) region, then it might be reasonable to compare the EU with SADC in order to study, for example, how national constitutional courts deal with regional rulemaking. However, if the capacity to influence decision-making in the area of trade at the global level (WTO) is considered an essential

³⁷ Dorrucchi et al., for example, compare the conditions for monetary integration in the EC in the 1960s and 1970s with the corresponding conditions for Mercosur in the 1990s. Several other researchers have followed similar approaches. Ettore Dorrucchi, Stefano Firpo, Marcel Fratzscher and Francesco Paolo Mongelli, 'European Integration: What lessons for other regions? The case of Latin America', *ECB Working Paper*, 2002, nr. 185; Ettore Dorrucchi, Stefano Firpo, Marcel Fratzscher and Francesco Paolo Mongelli, 'The Link between Institutional and Economic Integration: Insights for Latin America from the European Experience', *Open Economies Review*, 15:3 (2004), pp. 239–260

³⁸ Karl W. Deutsch, et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience*, (Westport Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1957)

³⁹ Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

⁴⁰ David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, *Regional Orders. Building Security in a New World* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1997)

⁴¹ Rodrigo Tavares, 'Understanding Regional Peace and Security. A Framework for Analysis' *Contemporary Politics* 14:2(2008), pp.107-127

⁴² Robert A. Mundell, 'A Theory of Optimum Currency Areas', *American Economic Review*, 51:4 (1961), pp. 509-517.

characteristic of a region (in the sense of a regional economic power), then it probably makes more sense to compare the EU with the US. The identification of relevant comparators follows thus logically from the conceptualisation of the phenomenon under study.

As explained below, the n=1 problem (referring to the comparability of the European case) has received a lot of attention in regionalism studies. Now, if we look at it from the conceptual angle it might become a false problem. Let us explain this by using an analogy from comparative politics (or comparative economics) where national polities (or economies) are compared. If the general question is asked whether the US is comparable with Pakistan then the answer necessarily is that 'it depends'. They both belong to the category of formally sovereign states, so in that respect they are comparable. Directly related issues like how their constitutions are drafted, how political participation is taking place or how they vote in the UN General Assembly can be compared. But at the same time they are not good comparators when it comes to comparing the functioning of federal systems, the priorities in space programmes, or the impact of monetary policies on the global economy, etc. Now, asking the question whether the EU is comparable with SAARC is similar to the question whether the US is comparable to Pakistan. The answer is that it depends on the research question, while at the same time they both belong to the broad category of macro-regions if they are defined as non-sovereign governance systems involving territories and actors belonging to a few neighbouring states. From this perspective, the concern of regionalism scholars with the n=1 problem seems to be exaggerated.

As a conclusion of this section it can thus be argued that conceptual pluralism is inevitable and that the definition and understanding of the region 'depends' firstly on the type of discourse in which a certain geographical area is presented as a region and secondly on the research questions that are being addressed. The implication hereof is that explicit communication on underlying concepts is a necessity, especially when dealing with comparative and interdisciplinary work. It is thereby recommended to focus on the hard core of the definitional classes and on the discursive contexts in which they are used. It should be understood that the choice of the definition (and therefore, the phenomenon to be studied) has implications for the identification of the relevant comparators in comparative research.

The theoretical problem: the dominant role of European integration theory

Many theories have been proposed to explain the regionalisation process (and related phenomena). We can refer to good overviews already published elsewhere.⁴³ Suffice it to observe that when the phenomena are defined with sufficient rigor (see above), it becomes apparent that most of the existing theories are rather complementary than competing. Indeed, most of the theories are not 'competing' in the sense that they try to 'explain' identical phenomena in different ways but rather that they tend to focus on different (related) aspects of the phenomena we are interested in (major historical events, spill-over mechanisms, cost/benefits of integration decisions, etc). Consistent with conceptual pluralism and the multiplicity of research questions, theoretical eclecticism is thus a logical implication.⁴⁴

⁴³ Walter Mattli, *The Logic of Regional Integration. Europe and Beyond*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press, 1999); Ben Rosamond, *Theories of European Integration* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Antje Wiener and Thomas Diez, (eds), *European Integration Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Finn Laursen, *Comparative Regional Integration. Theoretical Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Fredrik Söderbaum and Timothy M. Shaw (eds), *Theories of New Regionalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003); Andrés Malamud, and Philippe C. Schmitter, 'The Experience of European Integration and the Potential for Integration in South America', *IBEI Working Papers*, 2007, nr. 6

⁴⁴ Different 'dependent variables' can be used as a basis for comparative research. See, for example, Alex Warleigh-Lack (2008), 'Studying Regionalization Comparatively. A Conceptual Framework', in Andrew F. Cooper, Christopher W. Hughes and Philippe De Lombaerde (eds), *Regionalisation and Global Governance. The Taming of Globalisation* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 43-60

At the same time we observe that there is weak communication between different theoretical stand-points, especially between rationalists, constructivists and reflectivists. The polarisation between rationalism and reflectivism is not fruitful and needs to be overcome. There can be much more integration. Comparison should thereby be seen as an opportunity for different theoretical standpoints to communicate, where explanatory and interpretative theory can debate and even cross-fertilise.

In this section we will focus on a central problem of the theorisation of comparative regionalism, namely the 'euro-centric' bias of most regionalism theories and the often misplaced tendency to use the European integration experience as a comparator for other regions. In one sense there is nothing unusual about Eurocentrism. In this light we agree with Lewis and Wigen in their account on the Eurocentrism in geography: "*all geographical traditions are rooted in local concerns and ethnocentric conceits, and had China emerged as the hegemon of the modern world system, our metageographical concepts would surely reflect Sinocentrism*".⁴⁵ Likewise, as is the case for many disciplines, Western (male) viewpoints are the standard. The problem is that whatever perspective that becomes overly dominating or the paradigm from which to judge all other views, then understanding is distorted.

In the study of regionalism there is an extremely strong bias in favour of European integration theory and practice. Even if regional specialists often consider their own region to be 'special' or even 'unique', these regionalisms are very often compared — implicitly or explicitly — against the backdrop of European integration theory and practice.

The Eurocentric bias in comparative regionalism and related theory-building has been a problem for several decades. Even if many of the classical neofunctionalists were conscious of their own Eurocentrism, they searched above all for those 'background conditions', 'functional equivalents' and 'spill-over' effects that were derived from the study of Europe. As Breslin et al. point out, they "*used the European experience as a basis for the production of generalisations about the prospects for regional integration elsewhere*". This resulted in difficulties in identifying comparable cases, or anything that corresponded to their definition of "regional integration".⁴⁶ This gave rise to the n=1 dilemma, which is discussed in the next section.

The argument here is that the treatment of European integration as the primary case or 'model' of regional integration still dominates many of the more recent studies of regionalism and regional integration, which is an important part of 'the problem of comparison' within this research area. Two broad attitudes towards comparative analysis within the field of regionalism are distinguishable, which revolve around two competing attitudes towards European integration theory (and practice). Both of these stand-points are pitfalls in the development of a more genuine comparative regionalism. One strand of thinking tends to elevate European integration theory and practice through comparative research, while the other is considerably less convinced of the advantages of comparative research and Europe-centred theories. The first perspective — especially variants of realist/intergovernmental and liberal/institutional scholarship — strongly emphasizes Europe-centred generalisations. This type of research has been dominated by a concern to explain variations from the 'standard' European case. Indeed, other modes of regionalism are, where they appear, characterised as loose and informal (such as Asia) or 'weak' (such as Africa), reflecting "a teleological prejudice informed by the assumption that 'progress' in

⁴⁵ Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents. A Critique of Metageography*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997), p.10. See for a discussion on the 'Western' dominance of IR theory: Ole Wæver, 'The Sociology of a Not So International Discipline: American and European Developments in International Relations Author(s)' *International Organization* 52: 4 (1998), pp. 687-727; Arlene Tickner, 'Seeing IR Differently: Notes from the Third World' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 32:2 (2003), pp. 295-324; Stephen Chan, 'Beyond the north-west. Africa and the east. in A.J.R Groom and Margot Light (ed.), *Contemporary International Relations. A Guide to Theory* (London: Pinter, 1994), pp. 237-245

⁴⁶ Shaun Breslin, Richard Higgott and Ben Rosamond, 'Regions in Comparative Perspective', in Shaun Breslin, Christopher W. Hughes, Nicola Philips and Ben Rosamond (eds), *New Regionalisms in the Global Political Economy*, (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 2

regional integration is defined in terms of EU-style institutionalisation".⁴⁷ One reason for this bias lies in the ways the underlying assumptions and understandings about the nature of regionalism (which most often stem from a particular reading of European integration) influence perceptions about how regionalism in other parts of the world does (and should) look. In other words, the Eurocentrism results in a false universalism. As Hurrell asserts, "the study of comparative regionalism has been hindered by so-called theories of regionalism which turn out to be little more than the translation of a particular set of European experiences into a more abstract theoretical language."⁴⁸

Avoiding Europe-centeredness has been an ongoing issue in the study of regionalism among developing countries and for critical scholarship in the field of international relations. There are persuasive reasons for taking stock of cumulative research on regionalism in the developing world and for being cautious regarding EU-style institutionalisation inherent in most classical or mainstream perspectives or policies. Indeed, there have been a number of innovative efforts to develop a regional approach specifically aimed at the developing world.⁴⁹ However even these perspectives often tend to mirror the Europe-centred view, thus celebrating the differences in theory and practice between regionalism in Europe and in the developing world. According to Warleigh and Rosamond this has even resulted in a caricature of European integration and/or of classical regional integration theory, giving rise to unnecessary fragmentation within the field.⁵⁰

The barrier for achieving a nuanced comparative analysis is not European integration experience or theory *per se*, but rather the dominance of certain constructions and models of European integration. Conversely, discussions about regionalism in Africa or Asia have often reduced the EC/EU to the community method or a common market, or a simple point of reference, or to a model/anti-model. Further, many comparisons and generalisations, which depart from the European context, are skewed through a lack of sensitivity to the issues around comparing regions with different levels of development and holding unequal positions in the current world order.

A more advanced debate about comparative regionalism will not be reached through simply celebrating differences from European integration theory and practice, but rather in going beyond dominant interpretations of European integration, and drawing more broadly upon alternative theories that draw attention to aspects of European integration that are more comparable to other regions. To neglect Europe is to miss the opportunity to take advantage of the richness of the EU project and laboratory. The challenge for comparative regionalism is to both include and transcend European integration theory and practice. But this requires enhanced communication between various specialisations and theoretical standpoints. Finally, more attention should be paid to theories, concepts and ideas that have emerged outside Europe, for example, open regionalism, flying geese patterns and growth triangles in an Asian context, Pan-Africanism, development corridors and informal cross-border networks in an African context, Prebisch' views and pan-Americanism (Bolivarism) in a Latin American context. For comparative analysis, it should be explored to what extent their relevance transcends the regional particularities.

⁴⁷Shaun Breslin, Richard Higgott and Ben Rosamond, 'Regions in Comparative Perspective', in Shaun Breslin, Christopher W. Hughes, Nicola Philips and Ben Rosamond (eds), *New Regionalisms in the Global Political Economy*, (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 11

⁴⁸ Andrew Hurrell, 'The Regional Dimension of International Relations Theory', in Mary Farrell, Björn Hettne and Luk Van Langenhove (eds), *The Global Politics of Regionalism. Theory and Practice*. (London: Pluto Press, 2005), p. 39

⁴⁹ Andrew W. Axline (ed), *The Political Economy of Regional Cooperation. Comparative Case Studies* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1994); Marianne, H. Marchand, Morten Bøås and Timothy M. Shaw 'New Regionalisms in the New Millennium', *Third World Quarterly (special issue)*, 20:5 (1999), pp. 897-910; Daniel Bach (Ed.), *Regionalisation in Africa: Integration and Disintegration*, (Oxford: James Currey, 1999).

⁵⁰Alex Warleigh and Ben Rosamond, *Theorising Regional Integration Comparatively. An Introduction*, Paper presented at ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Nicosia, 25-30 April 2006

The problem of empirical methodology

As in any social sciences endeavour, there are two broad approaches to the study of regions. The first is to study single cases with an emphasis on understanding the historical processes of the case. This is called idiographic research and characterised by qualitative research approaches⁵¹. The second approach is to study multiple cases with an emphasis on finding general explanations that account for all the phenomena studied. This is called nomothetic research and characterised by quantitative research approaches. In the field of comparative regionalism processes, the latter approach has been mostly utilised to study the economic impacts of regional trade agreements. In between these two alternatives stands the comparative case-study method. Below, both approaches will be briefly discussed and it will be argued that a combination of both approaches is feasible and desirable in order to improve the quality of comparative work in this area. We will point to some of the weaknesses in current comparative empirical research on regionalism.

The case-study method: n = 1 or n > 1?

As mentioned before, the debate on comparative regionalism is traditionally dominated by the study of European integration as the primary case of regional integration. This 'Europe-centeredness', emphasised by the perception of the EU as a *sui generis* actor in international affairs, constitutes an obstacle to deepen and broaden the understanding of regionalisms outside the EU, as well as to a deepened understanding of the EU by increased comparative regionalism. Deriving from this so-called 'n=1 problem', there is a serious lack of communication between EU scholars (focusing attention on comparative politics based on state-analogies) and scholars of regional integration (focusing on IR/IPE) on a theoretical and conceptual level. The lack of communication and interaction between EU studies and regionalism in the rest of the world is stark, although some recent attempts have begun to remedy this lack.⁵²

Indeed, there has been a tendency within EU studies during the recent decade to consider the EU as a nascent, if unconventional, polity in its own right. This view holds that the EU should be studied as a political system rather than as a project of regional integration or regionalism.⁵³ Jacques Delors even once called the EU an 'Unidentified Political Object'. The corollary is that established tools of political science and comparative politics should be used in EU studies and that international studies and relations are not equipped to deal with the complexity of the contemporary EU.⁵⁴ This view has also reinforced the notion that the EU is a *sui generis* construction, thereby downplaying the similarities between the EU and other regionalist projects.

⁵¹ The idiographic/nomothetic division has its origins in psychology but can be applied to all other social sciences. See, Jonathan A. Smith, Rom Harré and Luk Van Langenhove, *Rethinking Methods in Psychology* (London: Sage, 1995).

⁵² Finn Laursen, *Comparative Regional Integration. Theoretical Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Mario Telò (ed.), *European Union and New Regionalism. Regional Actors and Global Governance in a Post-Hegemonic Era* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Alex Warleigh, 'In Defence of Intra-Disciplinarity. European Studies, the New Regionalism, and the Issue of Democratisation', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17:2 (2004), pp.301-318; Alex Warleigh, 'Learning from Europe? EU Studies and the Re-thinking of International Relations' *European Journal of International Relations* 12:1 (2006), pp.31-51

⁵³ Simon Hix, 'The Study of the European Community: The Challenge to Comparative Politics', *West European Politics* 17:1 (1994), pp. 1-30; and Simon Hix, *The Political System of the European Union* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999)

⁵⁴ See Ben Rosamond for a detailed discussion about the relationship between EU studies and international studies. Ben Rosamond, *Theories of European Integration* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Also see Alex Warleigh, 'In Defence of Intra-Disciplinarity. European Studies, the New Regionalism, and the Issue of Democratisation', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17:2 (2004), pp.301-318; Alex Warleigh, 'Learning from Europe? EU Studies and the Re-thinking of International Relations' *European Journal of International Relations* 12:1 (2006), pp.31-51.

According to Ben Rosamond, the parochialism inherent in this particular strand of EU studies has contributed little in deepening our understanding of the EU as a political system. He argues that EU studies should return to the broader ambitions of the comparative and classical regional integration theory (especially neofunctionalism), at least to the extent of developing generalisable and comparative conceptual and theoretical frameworks.⁵⁵ As noted above, even if the basic concepts need to be adjusted and revised to fit the realities of contemporary regionalism and the context of globalisation, the rigour with which earlier theorists undertook comparative analysis can serve as an inspiration for the development of a more genuinely *comparative* regionalism.

The (perceived) lack of comparable cases, in combination with the complexity of the regionalisation phenomenon, partly explain the preference of scholars in this field for the single case-study method. This tendency has been further strengthened by recent developments in social constructivist and new regionalist approaches to regionalisation. The tendency is not only visible in Europe but also in Asia and Africa. Many scholars tend to use specific contextual language to describe rather similar phenomena instead of applying general concepts and developing questions and hypotheses that can be transferred to cross-regional comparisons.⁵⁶ Differently expressed, there is a tension in the field of regionalism between regional specialisation and comparative analysis. Until recently the former has been dominating, implying an overemphasis on case study methods. The case-study method has obvious advantages to better grasp the specifics and nuances of each regionalisation process. The method allows for within-case analysis and process tracking, which is particularly relevant to study regionalisation processes and the adjustment of actors to institutional changes. Regional and area specialists are certainly correct in that we need deep multidisciplinary knowledge of various contexts and people. The disadvantage of case studies is, however, that a single case is a weak base for creating new generalisation or invalidating existing generalisations.⁵⁷ Hence, comparative analysis helps guard against ethnocentric bias and culture-bound interpretations that can arise when a specialisation is over-contextualised or the area of study is too isolated.

This preference for the case-study method should not only be explained in terms of the (complex) characteristics of the phenomenon under study, but also in terms of the disciplinary traditions and practices in political science and IR. Compared to economics, for example, there is, generally speaking, less rigor in empirically testing theoretical hypotheses using data and standardised techniques.⁵⁸

A sociological explanation for the single case approach (focusing on the European or other case) is that the majority of scholars have historically tended to specialise in a particular region — regardless what discipline they come from (comparative politics, international relations, area studies). Sometimes comparisons are made within each region (intra-regional comparison, for instance, comparing the different regionalisms in Asia), and a small but increasing number of scholars compare across regions as well (cross-regional comparison). The fundamental problem thereby is that many case studies and the vast majority of comparisons tend to use theoretical frameworks that are biased towards European integration theory and practice.

The mentioned combination of complexity and a (perceived) lack of comparable cases in regionalisation studies is an example of the problem known in the literature as the many variables/small-N problem, which makes it complicated to reach strong conclusions about the

⁵⁵ Ben Rosamond, 'Rethinking Classical Integration Theory', in Andrew F. Cooper, Christopher W. Hughes and Philippe De Lombaerde (eds), *Regionalisation and Global Governance. The Taming of Globalisation* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 80-95.

⁵⁶ Fredrik Söderbaum, 'Comparative Regional Integration and Regionalism', in Todd Landman and Neil Robinson (eds), *Handbook of Comparative Politics* (London: Sage, 2009, forthcoming).

⁵⁷ Walter A. Axline, 'Comparative Case Studies of Regional Cooperation Among Developing Countries', in Walter A. Axline (ed.), *The Political Economy of Regional Cooperation. Comparative Case Studies* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1994), p. 15

⁵⁸ Barry Eichengreen, 'Dental Hygiene and Nuclear War: How International Relations Looks from Economics', *International Organization* 52:4 (1998), pp. 993-1012

relationships between variables with a sufficient degree of confidence. The recommended research strategies in these situations point to the need to increase the number of cases (if possible), to allow for across-case comparisons, and to concentrate on a limited number of variables, controlling for a number of excluded variables.⁵⁹

With respect to the first point, it is important to distinguish between regions and regional organizations as ‘cases’ and what constitute ‘cases’ from the perspective of the empirical research set-up. One particular region or regional organization can easily deliver (or be disaggregated into) several ‘cases’, depending on the research questions that are addressed.⁶⁰ The consideration of different moments or lapses in time, if it makes sense, is only one strategy that can be followed here to multiply the number of cases. Cases should thus not be equated with observations. One case will often allow to extract different observations, so that minimal sample sizes can be reached to perform sensible quantitative analyses.

With respect to case selection, it should be based on their relevance given the objectives of the research project (‘purposive’ case selection) and should be theoretically framed (‘theoretical’ sampling).⁶¹ In our opinion, case selection in comparative regionalism deserves more attention from the researchers. Many comparisons that have been presented are based on accidental circumstances and opportunities of individual researchers. Case selection should be closer connected to the research problem at stake and the chosen conceptual and theoretical frameworks. As explained before, conceptual clarity makes the identification of adequate comparators easier. An interesting avenue for the detection of relevant comparators is also to use emerging or existing interregional interactions as indicators of commonality between regions. This is based on the assumption that regions (just like states) will interact when they have something in common (competences, interests, scale, etc.) and, this way, the comparators are endogenously defined by the regions themselves. In addition, this strategy can contribute to the policy-relevance of the research work.

An alternative approach to case selection is to use preliminary quantitative analysis to guide the process, by focusing on the core cases and/or by focusing on outliers. A promising avenue is to use mixed methods (i.e. to combine, within the same research project or programme, qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to generate synergies), like in Lieberman’s proposal for ‘nested analysis’.⁶² Although it should be observed that the use of mixed methods requires a minimal scale of research projects, possibly going beyond the average scale of individual (comparative) research endeavours.

Applied to the EU this means that as an object of research the EU can be studied in different ways and its comparability depends on the issue studied. As all other aspects of the social realm the EU has at the same time highly individual features and general characteristics it shares with other regional entities. As such, one can claim that in some aspects the EU can be compared with

⁵⁹ David Silverman (2000), *Doing Qualitative Research*, London: Sage Publications, p.179.

Jack S. Levy, ‘Qualitative Methods in International Relations’, in Michael Brecher and Frank P. Harvey (eds), *Evaluating Methodology in International Studies* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002) pp. 140-141; Zeev Maoz, ‘Case Study Methodology in International Studies. From Storytelling to Hypothesis Testing’, in Michael Brecher and Frank P. Harvey (eds), *Evaluating Methodology in International Studies* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002) p. 163

⁶⁰ See also, Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁶¹ Silverman, *ibid.*, pp. 104-106; Jack S. Levy, ‘Qualitative Methods in International Relations’, in Michael Brecher and Frank P. Harvey (eds), *Evaluating Methodology in International Studies* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002) Zeev Maoz, ‘Case Study Methodology in International Studies. From Storytelling to Hypothesis Testing’, in Michael Brecher and Frank P. Harvey (eds), *Evaluating Methodology in International Studies* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002) p. p. 166; Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, ‘Building Theories from Case Study Research’, in A. Michael Huberman and Matthew B. Miles (eds), *The Qualitative Researcher’s Companion* (Thousand Oakes: Sage Publications, 2002) pp. 12-13

⁶² Evan S. Lieberman, “Nested Analysis as a Mixed-Method Strategy for Comparative Research”, *American Political Science Review*, 99:3 (2005), pp. 435-452.

many other forms of regionalism. For instance, one way to look at the EU as being one amongst many regional trade agreements notified at the WTO. But simultaneously, the EU can only be compared with a small number of other regional organizations. And finally, the EU has indeed also some unique properties. This is the case for at least one issue: the EU is the first and only international organisation that gives citizenship to the citizens of its member states.⁶³ So the EU is in some cases like all other regional organisations, in other cases like some other regional organisations and in certain ways like no other regional organisations.

We are thus of the view that the comparative element in regionalisation studies should be further developed along different tracks as it will be crucial for enhancing cross-fertilisation between various theoretical standpoints and regional specialisations. As noted above, while doing comparative research, it is crucial to move beyond the ‘false universalism’ inherent in a selective reading of regionalism in the core, and in the EU in particular. As Hurrell asserts, rather than trying to understand other regions through the distorting mirror of Europe, it is better to think in general theoretical terms and in ways that draw both on traditional international relations theory, comparative politics and on other areas of social thought.⁶⁴ This will only be possible if the case of Europe is integrated within a larger and more general discourse of comparative regionalism, built around general concepts and theories, but that remains culturally sensitive and incorporate its uniqueness.

This calls for a middle ground to be established between context and case/area studies on the one hand, and ‘hard’ social science as reflected in the use of ‘laborative’ comparisons on the other. This middle ground has been referred to as the ‘eclectic center’ of comparative studies.⁶⁵ Such a middle ground can avoid the equal interlopers of exaggerated contextualisation on the one hand, and over-generalised (or irrelevant) theory on the other. Achieving this perspective on the eclectic centre of comparative studies will be inclusive rather than exclusive—even if it will be too “social sciency” for some and too much of “storytelling” for others.⁶⁶ There need not be any opposition between area studies and disciplinary studies/international studies, or between particularising and universalising studies. The eclectic centre perspective should enable area studies, comparative politics and international studies to engage in a more fruitful dialogue, and through that process overcome the fragmentation in the field of regionalism and regional integration. Such perspective should be able to bridge divisions between earlier and more recent theories and experiences of regionalism and regional integration. It should also enable cross-fertilisation between different regional debates and specialisations. Finally, an eclectic centre perspective will highlight the richness of comparative analysis, and enhance a dialogue about the fundamentals of comparative analysis (for example, what constitute comparable cases, and the many different forms, methods and design of comparative analysis).

Stylised facts and the role of quantitative research

In the previous sections we discussed the prevailing preference for case-study methods and regional specialisation. Although we recognise the obvious advantages of this method, we argue

⁶³ Jaap A. Hoeksma, “Voorbij Federatie en Confederatie: De EU als unie van burgers en lidstaten”, *Internationale Spectator*, 63:2 (2009), p. 84.

⁶⁴ Andrew Hurrell ‘The Regional Dimension of International Relations Theory’, in Mary Farrell, Björn Hettne and Luk Van Langenhove (eds), *The Global Politics of Regionalism. Theory and Practice*. (London: Pluto Press, 2005) p. 39

⁶⁵ Atul Kohli, Peter B. Evans, Peter J. Katzenstein et. al., *The Role of Theory in Comparative Politics. A Symposium World Politics* 48:1 (1995), pp.1-49; also see *Africa Today*, special issue 44:2 (1997); Andrew W. Axline (ed), *The Political Economy of Regional Cooperation. Comparative Case Studies* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1994); Anthony Payne ‘The New Political Economy of Area Studies’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 27:2 (1998), pp 253-73

⁶⁶ Atul Kohli, Peter B. Evans, Peter J. Katzenstein et. al., *The Role of Theory in Comparative Politics. A Symposium World Politics* 48:1 (1995), pp.1-49

here that regionalisation scholars could benefit from a more open attitude towards adopting different empirical research methods, including quantitative methods, and thus striking a better balance between qualitative and quantitative techniques when studying regions. Quantitative research serves thereby not only the purpose of empirical verification/falsification of research hypotheses but generates interesting feed-back effects for the methodological, conceptual and theoretical discussions. Theorisation about regionalism is all too often based on the a-critical use of a number of ‘stylised facts’, referring to the relative success or depth of certain regional integration processes or organisations compared to others. Let us illustrate the potential of paying more attention to quantitative analysis in regionalisation studies, with a few examples.

Intra-regional trade indicators

Political scientists and economists alike often refer to the intra-regional trade share, defined as intra-regional trade as a percentage of total trade by member states of an integration scheme. The indicator is often a-critically used as an indicator of ‘success’ of a particular integration project, but at the same time, although a bit confusingly, also as an indicator of the appropriateness of the conditions to engage in further steps in the integration process. In *The Choice for Europe*, Moravcsik suggested that regional trade dependency, captured by such indicators, is in effect the main underlying factor explaining the demand for (more) integration in a particular region.⁶⁷ One of the stylised facts surrounding integration studies is precisely that the EU shows a high value for this indicator, whereas other regions do not. Whereas the EU-27 scores around 70% on this indicator, regional arrangements like CARICOM or SADC score below 10%.⁶⁸ A lot of theorizing is explicitly or implicitly based on this ‘stylised fact’.

However, the indicator is not unproblematic. One of the reasons is that the indicator is correlated with the size of the region; economically large (small) regions logically trade more (less) within their region and less (more) with the rest of the world. There is thus a problem of comparability, especially if we would want the indicator to reflect the ‘success’ of regional integration policies. Alternative measures, correcting the intra-regional trade share for the scale bias and other technical deficiencies, have been proposed.⁶⁹ Without going into a detailed discussion of all these indicators here, we just signal that different indicators (all reflecting the importance of intra-regional trade) can produce different country rankings (see table 1). The interesting observation here is that it is precisely by making the indicators ‘more comparable’ that the generally accepted stylised facts start to lose their solidity.

Table 1: Ranking of regional integration groupings according to different indicators of the importance of intra-regional trade⁷⁰

Ranking according to:	Intra-regional trade share	Intra-regional trade intensity index	Symmetric trade introversion index
1	EU-27	CARICOM	CARICOM
2	EU-15	CAN	CAN
3	NAFTA	SADC	NAFTA

⁶⁷ Andrew Moravcsik, *The Choice of Europe. Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998)

⁶⁸ Data obtained from the Regional Integration Knowledge System –RIKS-, <http://www.riks.garnet-eu.org/>, last visited 18 April 2008.

⁶⁹ Lelio Iapadre, ‘Regional Integration and the Geography of World Trade. Statistical Indicators and Empirical Evidence’, in Philippe De Lombaerde (ed.), *Assessment and Measurement of Regional Integration* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 66-85

⁷⁰ Source: RIKS, <http://www.riks.garnet-eu.org/>, last visited 18 April 2008.

4	ASEAN	MERCOSUR	SADC
5	MERCOSUR	ASEAN	EU-27
6	CAN	NAFTA	MERCOSUR
7	CARICOM	EU-27	EU-15
8	SADC	EU-15	ASEAN

Regional budgets

In his 1968 article, Nye proposed to use two indicators (and a third being related to the second) to compare more systematically and more ‘scientifically’ regional integration processes in different regions. The first was the indicator of intra-regional trade (exports), which has been discussed in the previous paragraphs. The second was an indicator which he called ‘services integration’ but that basically reflected the budgets available at the regional level for the financing of regional policies and institutions. And whereas the first has been widely used since then, the second has not been used at all although it reflects an important dimension of a regionalisation process: the mobilisation (or not) of public funds at the regional level. Indicators capturing this dimension inform us not only of the budgetary space which is available for regional policy initiatives, but they are good indicators of the ‘depth’ of the process (otherwise often an unclear concept) or the level of commitment of the participating states, and could be used to test hypotheses about the sustainability or effects of the processes.

Qualitative comparative research is now often based on the observation of the formal characteristics (and coincidences/divergences) of the integration processes and institutions. Observed differences in terms of effectiveness, effects or sustainability are then explained in terms of different combinations of supply/demand factors for integration or other contextual factors but, in our opinion, taking data on budgets (and related figures) into account has the potential to enrich the analysis.

As an illustration, many observers have pointed at the African Union and the Andean Community as examples of regional organisations that have ‘copied’, at least to some extent, the institutions of the EU. They then proceed to observe that that these organisations are less efficient and less effective than the EU, thus presenting a new ‘stylised fact’ on the basis of which new theorizing is based. However, the superficial character of this comparison is obvious when it is taken into account that the budget of CAN should be multiplied by 400 to be ‘comparable’ to the European budget (as a percentage of GDP), and that the budget of the African Union should even be multiplied by 10000!⁷¹ In Nye’s article the budget of the CACM had to be multiplied by 80 to reach the level of the EACM (table 2). Not relating the outcomes of integration policies to resources does not allow to draw firm conclusions about efficiency or effectiveness of regional organisations.⁷²

⁷¹ Data gathered by the authors.

⁷² Budgetary data can further be used to derive (comparative) fiscal integration indicators, in an analogous way as those developed to study decentralisation processes. Philippe De Lombaerde, and Ana-Cristina Costea (2006), ‘Comparative Fiscal Integration Indicators’, in: Philippe De Lombaerde (ed.), *Assessment and Measurement of Regional Integration* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 130-145.

Table 2: Trade and Services Integration’ in the East African Common Market and the Central American Common Market, 1965⁷³

Regions	EIt	EIs	Percent of EIs externally financed
EACM	25	8.0	16
CACM	19	0.1	46

Regional integration scores

A third example refers to the attempts that have been made to attribute scores to different integration processes in order to ‘measure’ and compare their depths and speeds.⁷⁴ Without going into the details of each of these studies, the results again reveal a number of interesting points. In table 3, for example, rankings are shown for five integration arrangements in the Americas, referring to approximately the same ‘moment’ in time and using the same conceptual framework (Balassa framework). The rankings are different, pointing again to the need to question the robustness of certain widely shared stylised facts (e.g. Mercosur as the most successful integration scheme outside Europe, the low level of institutionalised integration in NAFTA, etc.). Coding exercises also oblige to question the sequencing of integration phases in the real world. And the need to make weights explicit obliges to reflect on the relative importance of different ways of integration and on the meaning of words like ‘deep’ integration.

Table 3: Inconsistencies between (institutional) integration score-based rankings in the Americas⁷⁵

Dorrucci et al. (2002, 2004)	Feng and Genna (2003, 2004, 2005)
CARICOM	CAN
CAN	CARICOM
CACM	NAFTA
Mercosur	Mercosur
NAFTA	CACM

⁷³ EIt = trade integration = proportion of intraregional exports to the total exports of the region. EIs = services integration = expenditures on jointly administered services (including the administration of trade integration schemes) as a percent of GNP. Source: Joseph S. Nye, ‘Comparative Regional Integration. Concept and Measurement.’ *International Organization* 22:4 (1968) pp. 861-862

⁷⁴ Such attempts include: Hufbauer, G.C. and J.J. Schott (1994), *Western Hemisphere Economic Integration*, Washington: Institute for International Economics; Ettore Dorrucci, Stefano Firpo, Marcel Fratzscher and Francesco Paolo Mongelli, ‘European Integration: What lessons for other regions? The case of Latin America’, *ECB Working Paper*, 2002, nr. 185; Ettore Dorrucci, Stefano Firpo, Marcel Fratzscher and Francesco Paolo Mongelli, ‘The Link between Institutional and Economic Integration: Insights for Latin America from the European Experience’, *Open Economies Review*, 15:3 (2004), pp. 239-260; UNECA, *Annual Report on Integration in Africa 2002* (Addis Ababa: UN Economic Commission for Africa, 2002); Gaspare M. Genna and Yi Feng, ‘Regional Integration and Domestic Institutional Homogeneity: A Comparative Analysis of Regional Integration in the Americas, Pacific Asia and Western Europe.’ *Review of International Political Economy*, 10:2 (2003), pp. 278-309. Most of these attempts used the Balassa framework. B Balassa, *The Theory of Economic Integration* (Homewood, IL: Irwin, 1961)

⁷⁵ Note: regional arrangements are ranked from high to low levels of institutional integration. Feng and Genna use the term integration achievement but it is equivalent to institutional integration. Source: Philippe De Lombaerde, Ettore Dorrucci, Gaspare M. Genna et. al., ‘Quantitative Monitoring and Comparison of Regional Integration Processes: Steps Towards Good Practise’, in Ariane Kössler and Martin Zimmek (eds), *Elements of Regional Integration* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2008, forthcoming)

Conclusion

Over the last decade regionalism has become somewhat of an academic growth industry in a number of social science specialisations: European studies, comparative politics, international economics, international geography, international relations and international political economy. The approach of these different academic specialisations varies considerably, which means that regionalism means different things to different people. This fragmentation in the field has resulted in that the comparative element in the study of regionalism remains underdeveloped. Contestations regarding what to compare, how to compare and sometimes even why to compare at all, arise predominantly as a consequence of at least three crucial divisions emphasised in this article: (i) the division between EU studies and those interested in regionalism in the rest of the world; (ii) the lack of communication between scholars from various theoretical stand-points and research traditions, and (iii) the tension between regional specialisation and idiographic analysis (case study and area studies) and more comparative and nomothetic analysis. The main argument of this article is that the ongoing development of comparative regionalism rests upon finding a more constructive dialogue between these standpoints. The tensions and differences in the field illustrate the fact that the regional phenomenon is multidimensional and pluralist. The solution is to allow eclecticism and avoid hegemonism and ignorance. Ingredients of 'better' comparative research in this area include: more conceptual clarity (and flexibility, at the same time), sounder case selection when cases are compared, allowing for heterogeneous or a-symmetric comparisons (involving micro-regions and/or states) when appropriate, a better integration of qualitative and quantitative methods, and a more careful use and interpretation of stylised facts.