

# **CSGR 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference**

## ***AFTER THE GLOBAL CRISES: WHAT NEXT FOR REGIONALISM?***

**Scarman House, University of Warwick  
16–18 September 1999**

### **Theorizing the Rise of Regionness**

**BJÖRN HETTNE AND FREDRIK SÖDERBAUM**

*Department of Peace and Development Research  
Göteborg University*

# **Theorizing the Rise of Regionness**

Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum

Paper delivered at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference,  
*After the Global Crises: What Next for Regionalism?*  
16-18<sup>th</sup> September 1999  
Scarman House, University of Warwick

*Draft, not for quotation*

Department of Peace and Development Research  
Göteborg University, Box 700, SE 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden  
B.Hettne@padrigu.gu.se & F.Soderbaum@padrigu.gu.se

## ABSTRACT

We are witnessing a resurgence of regionalism in world politics. Drawing on the significant but rather diverse old and new theorizing in the field, this article seeks to move towards a more coherent construction of a New Regionalism Theory (NRT), built around the core concept of ‘regionness’, indicating the multidimensional result of the process of regionalization. The concept of regionness — ranging from regional area, regional complex, regional society, regional community to region-state — is outlined and suggested as a comparative analytical tool for understanding the emergence of regions and the formation of relevant actors in a historical and multidimensional perspective. To some extent the five levels express a certain evolutionary logic, but there is for sure nothing deterministic with the rise of regionness in world politics.

The *regional area* is more of a pre-regional zone, but draws attention to that regions are rooted in territorial space. Ever-increasing social contacts and transactions between previously more isolated groups — the creation of a *regional complex* — facilitates some sort of regionness, albeit on a low and sometimes conflictual level, and indicate the real starting point of the regionalization process. The dynamics at the next level can be described as a deepening as well as broadening along several dimensions, economic as well as political and cultural, i.e. multidimensional regionalization. There are several processes of communication, cooperation and interaction emerging on parallel tracks between a multitude of actors. This rise in intensity, scope and width of social relations along several dimensions (economic, political and cultural) lead to the gradual establishment of a *regional society*, while the convergence and mutually reinforcing character of these relations reflect the emergence of a *regional community*. Finally the *region-state* indicates the rise of a new multicultural, multilayered and more dynamic political entity, which represents a step forward compared to the violent Westphalian nation-state logic, i.e. indicating what a future and probably better world order — regional multilateralism — may look like.

## Introduction

Regionalism has now, since more than a decade 'been brought back in' to international studies, after some time of almost complete neglect. The 'new regionalism' began to emerge in the mid-1980s in the context of the comprehensive structural transformation of the global system. Similar to the 'old regionalism' which began in the 1950s and stagnated in the 1970s, the new wave must be understood in its historical context. That is, it needs to be related to the structural transformation of the world, *inter alia* including (i) the move from bipolarity towards a multipolar or perhaps tripolar structure, with a new division of power and new division of labour; (ii) the relative decline of American hegemony in combination with a more permissive attitude on the part of the USA towards regionalism; (iii) the erosion of the Westphalian nation-state system and the growth of interdependence and 'globalization', and (iv) the changed attitudes towards (neo-liberal) economic development and political system in the developing countries, as well as in the post-communist countries.<sup>1</sup>

The new regionalism is a truly world-wide phenomenon, that is taking place in more areas of the world than ever before. Today's regionalism is extroverted rather than introverted, which reflects the deeper interdependence of today's global political economy and the intriguing relationship between globalism and regionalism. It should also be noted that the new regionalism is simultaneously linked with nationalism and domestic factors, sometimes challenging the nation-state while at other times strengthening it. Thus the renewed trend of regionalism is a complex process of change simultaneously involving state as well as non-state actors, and occurring as a result of global, regional, national and local level explanations. It is not possible to state which level is dominant, because actors and processes at the various levels interact and their relative importance differ in time and space.

In the wider sense, 'new regionalism' refers to the general phenomenon under study, i.e. the new or second wave of regionalism arising more or less all over the world today. In the narrow sense it refers to the current ideology of regionalism, i.e. the urge for a regionalist order, either in a particular geographical area or as a type of world order. Regionalism in this particular sense is usually associated with a programme and strategy, and may lead to formal institution-building. 'Regionalization' generally denotes the (empirical) process that leads to patterns of interaction, integration and coherence within a particular cross-national geographical space. It is important to distinguish formal

---

<sup>1</sup> On the re-emergence of regionalism, see Hettne, Inotai and Sunkel, 1999; Fawcett and Hurrell 1995; Gamble and Payne 1996; de Melo and Panagariya 1993; Stallings 1995; Hettne and Söderbaum, 1998.

regionalism (as ideology and programme) from the process of regionalization. In Europe there is, for example, a strong anti-regionalist ideology which does not necessarily prevent regionalization from taking place. Regionalization implies increasing regionness. Thus the latter concept is a way to investigate the state of regionalization in various contexts and to compare various situations.

In spite of the recent mushrooming of research in the field, we still need to learn more about the 'whys' and 'hows' of regionalism(s), how regionalization is socially constructed, and particularly why some regions develop into higher levels of 'regionness' while others do not. That is, the overall 'puzzle' to explain, understand, predict and prescribe the dynamics of regionness in world politics remains unresolved or only partly resolved. In our view this is mainly explained by the lack of adequate theory. Existing theories can of course provide some answers on the way, but to a large extent they are (too) partial, too formalistic and state-centric and tend to hide more than they reveal. Our ambition in this article is therefore to suggest the basis for a more coherent theoretical perspective for studying the dynamics of regionalization, focusing on the concept of regionness.

It may still be somewhat premature to outline a theory of the new regionalism in full, but it should be possible to say what we should expect from it. A theory of the new regionalism cannot be about emerging regions only. It has to be a theory about the world order in transformation. The New Regionalism Theory (NRT) has to explain the world order that makes the new regionalisms possible, or even necessary, and the world order that may result from the new regionalisms in interaction. Note the plural. Analysts of the renewed trend of regionalism emphasize that there are many regionalisms and regionalizations. The world order approach does not prevent a focus on the regions, which is important both for empirical and normative reasons. Empirical because we do not yet know enough about the emerging regional formations, normative because the point is to question some consequences of globalization and discuss the possibility of a 'return of the political' in the form of regionalism. Somewhat ironically reflected in a recent statement by George Soros, there is increasing agreement that some 'regulation' is needed in the world political economy; the question is how, by whom and for whom?

The paper is structured as follows. We start off with some meta-theoretical points of departure before outlining the five levels of regionness in the main section of the paper. We then briefly discuss the relation between regionness and the recent revival of 'security communities', made by Adler and Barnett. In the conclusion we draw the strings together and briefly sketch a NRT research agenda.

## Meta-theoretical postulates

We should briefly describe our meta-theoretical points of departures: (i) global social theory; (ii) social constructivism and (iii) comparative regional studies.

### *Global social theory*

Since the new regionalism is closely linked to global structural change and globalization, it cannot be understood merely from the point of view of the single region in question. What we are looking for specifically is theory that takes regional peculiarities into consideration. This is thus not only motivated by the need to understand particular regions, because to better understand society in general is also to better understand a particular region. Good theory makes sense of ongoing events, it explains where we are, how we got there, and where we are going (without necessarily being able to forecast everything on the way). Good theory also makes it possible to act in order to improve our situation, but since we are not all sitting in the same boat, it also differentiates between different we-categories and facilitates a dialogue between worldviews and standpoints.<sup>2</sup>

Global social theory means a comprehensive social science that abandons state-centrism in an ontologically fundamental sense. Social processes must be analyzed delinked from national space. As Susan Strange recently emphasized, it is not our job to defend or excuse the 'Westfailure system'.<sup>3</sup> Somewhat simplistically we speak in favour of a marriage between certain strands in development theory and international political economy (IPE), or rather political economy (PE), since 'international' does not need mentioning. Such a merger may ultimately strengthen an emerging 'new' or 'critical political economy', dealing with historical power structures, emphasizing contradictions in them, as well as change and transformation expressed in normative terms (i.e. development).<sup>4</sup> This much needed focus on history is an escape from unchanging transhistorical theory, artificially imposed on an ever changing reality, and characterizing what still is mainstream international theory (i.e. IR and IPE).

Global social theory must go beyond the mystifications of the concept of globalization, distinguishing the new aspects from the old and specifying what concrete dimensions are involved and how they are related.

---

<sup>2</sup> For some insights into the art of creative theorizing, see Rosenau and Durfee, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Strange, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Cox 1996 and 1997; Hettne 1995a and b; Murphy and Tooze 1991; Neufeld 1995, Payne 1998.

Global social theory, furthermore, has to come to terms with micro-macro relation since the distinction between international and domestic is transcended. Conventionally analysts within the field of IR/IPE and international economics have been concerned mainly with the ‘big’ processes of macro-regionalism, primarily in and between the three core regions, Europe, North America and Asia Pacific, often with focus on EU, NAFTA and APEC, or other regional organizations such as ASEAN, MERCOSUR, SADC and ECOWAS and so on.<sup>5</sup> In other academic disciplines, such as geography, regional and cultural studies, urban planning and so on, the main focus has been placed on the sub-national or cross-border regions, such as the Euro-regions, growth polygons, growth triangles and development corridors in Asia, North America and Africa, as well as the micro-states such as Singapore and Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup> In line with our effort to contribute to a comprehensive, interdisciplinary, historically based international social science, we seek to integrate the disciplines rather than separate them, as is the case of current mono-disciplinary trends. One of the innovative features of the NRT is, at least in our own minds, the ambition to bridge the rift between macro-regionalism and micro-regionalism.

#### *Social constructivism*

Social constructivism ‘provides a theoretically rich and promising way of conceptualizing the interaction between material incentives, inter-subjective structures, and the identity and interests of the actors’.<sup>7</sup> Instead of focusing solely on material incentives, constructivists emphasize the importance of shared knowledge, learning, ideational forces, and normative and institutional structures. They claim that understanding intersubjective structures allows us to trace the ways in which interests and identities change over time and new forms of cooperation and community can emerge. It represents a sociological approach to systemic theory, which in turn is based on that political communities are not exogenously given but constructed by historically contingent interactions.

The relevance in this context would of course be that social constructivism draws particular attention to how regions are socially constructed. The region constitutes an open process, and can only be defined *post factum*. Regions are social constructions, and to observe and describe regionalization is also to participate in the construction of regions. Since there are no given regions, there are no given regionalist interests either,

---

<sup>5</sup> Coleman and Underhill 1998; Fawcett and Hurrell 1995, Gamble and Payne 1996; de Melo and Panagariya, 1993; Cable and Henderson 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Keating and Loughlin 1997; Ohmae 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Hurrell 1995: 72. Also see Checkel 1998; Ruggie 1998; Smith 1997.

but the interests and identities are shaped in the process of interaction and intersubjective understanding. But no interaction is possible without some shared interests to start with.<sup>8</sup> Regionalization is process. The relevance of 'hard structuralism' is in such a situation limited. We agree with Wendt in that 'structure has no existence or causal power apart from process.'<sup>9</sup> 'Structuralism' has thus to be transcended and in order to understand structural change we must move from structure to agency, actors and strategies. In accordance with social constructivism more generally, the NRT seeks to address the fact that agency, and particularly the role of often previously excluded transnational actors, is an under-researched field in the study of regionalism.

Similarly to neo-liberal institutionalists, social constructivists share the idea that that norms and beliefs may shape behaviour, but contrary to the former, rationalist/neo-utilitarian approach, actors' interests, motives, ideas and identities are not exogenously given but socially constructed by *reflective* actors, capable of adapting to challenges imposed by the actions of others and changing contexts. From this perspective, agency is often motivated and explained by ideas and identity (including repetitive interaction and learning).

### *Comparative studies*

Most studies of regionalization have been case studies of a single region, with emphasis on those variables that the particular theoretical approach perceives as most important in explaining the outcome. Scholars have often tried to draw lessons from the cases, but little genuine comparative analysis has been undertaken to date (although there is now a gradual increase of comparative studies).

Comparative studies have been heavily criticized from area specialists, post-modernists and others, who emphasize cultural relativism and the importance of a deep multidisciplinary knowledge of various contexts and people. Part of the critique seems to hold true, particularly the emphasis on that the comparative method is ultimately based on the same logic as the experimental method. Consequently, comparative analysis should be used with care in the social sciences. On the other hand, we believe that comparative analysis helps to guard against ethnocentric bias and culture-bound interpretations that can arise in a too contextualized specialization. Since theory necessarily relies on some generalizations, comparative analysis is also crucial for theory-building.

---

<sup>8</sup> Smith 1997: 185.

<sup>9</sup> Wendt 1992: 395.

We perceive a middle ground between context and area studies on the one hand and ‘hard’ social science as reflected in the use of ‘laborative’ comparisons on the other hand — i.e. what has been referred to as the ‘eclectic center’ of comparative studies.<sup>10</sup> By this combination we hope to avoid the devil of too detailed regional specialization and the deep blue sea of general theory. A useful way of overcoming whatever tensions there may exist between ‘globalism’ and ‘localism’ is to focus on Comparative Regional Studies within a globalized framework; i.e. to look upon a particular region in a world of regions, together constituting an emerging world order marked by regional peculiarities.

### **Theorizing regionness**

The concept of ‘region’ is obviously fundamental to regional analysis. The main task of identifying regions implies making judgements about the degree to which a particular area in various respects constitutes a distinct entity, which can be distinguished as a relatively coherent territorial subsystem (in contrast with non-territorial subsystems) from the rest of the global system. When different processes of regionalization in various fields and at various levels intensify and converge within the same area, the cohesiveness and thereby the distinctiveness of the region in question increases. The NRT seeks to describe this process of regionalization in terms of levels of ‘regionness’, i.e. the process whereby a geographical area is transformed from a passive object to an active subject capable of articulating the interests of the emerging region. Regionness thus implies that a region can be a region ‘more or less’. The level of regionness can both increase and decrease.

Mostly when we speak of regions we actually mean regions in the making. There are no ‘natural’ or ‘given’ regions, but these are created and recreated in the process of global transformation. Regionness can be understood in analogy with ‘stateness’ and ‘nationness’. The regionalization process can be intentional or non-intentional, and may proceed unevenly along the various dimensions of the ‘new regionalism’ (i.e. economics, politics, culture, security etc.). In what follows we will describe five generalized levels of regionness, which can be said to define a particular region in terms of regional coherence and community.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> World Politics, 1995; cf. Africa Today, 1997; Axline, 1994; Payne 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Hettne 1993. Representing our effort to move towards a more coherent theoretical construct, it should be noted that the present version of regionness differs slightly compared with previous formulations

Many theorists agree with the minimum definition of a region set out by Joe Nye: 'a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence'.<sup>12</sup> However, in an effort to transcend state-centrism and the obsession with regional organizations rather than the processes of regionalization, the NRT does not perceive regions as simple aggregations of 'states', and the regional frontier may very well cut through a particular state's geographical area, positioning some parts of the state within the region and others outside. For instance, it could be argued that some parts of China, mainly the coastal areas, form part of an East Asian regionalization process while mainland China does not. A less dramatic example is the well-consolidated nation-state of Sweden where, nevertheless, the eastern part goes Baltic, while the western goes Atlantic. Furthermore, what is referred to as a region with regard to economic relations may not always be a relevant delimitation seen from, for instance, a political or a cultural perspective. Particularly at the less advanced levels of regionness and with regard to the outer boundaries, which tend to be the most blurred, it is necessary to maintain eclectic, open and broad definitions of regions. However, the regionness thesis is based on that the diverse ideas and processes tend to converge as the regionalization process intensifies.

Given the excessive attention received in the literature, both old and new, it is important to conceive regional organization as a second order phenomenon, compared to processes that underlie regionalization in a particular geographical area or social space, which should be seen as 'region in the making'. Becoming rather than being is thus what is focused upon in this context. In what follows we identify five phases in such a process of becoming.

### *Regional area*

Although the extent of geographical contiguity must not be exaggerated, the NRT is founded on the fact that (almost by definition) a functioning community cannot exist separated from territory. That is, a region is firmly rooted in territorial space: a group of people living in a geographically bounded community, controlling a certain set of natural

---

made by Hettne (1993, 1997; cf. also Hettne, Inotai and Sunkel 1999) as well as Hettne and Söderbaum (1998).

<sup>12</sup> Nye 1968: vii.

resources, and united through a certain set of cultural values and common bonds of social order forged by history.<sup>13</sup>

First of all one can therefore identify a potential region as a primarily geographical unit, delimited by more or less natural physical barriers and marked by ecological characteristics: 'Europe from the Atlantic to the Ural', North America, the Southern cone of South America, 'Africa South of Sahara', Central Asia, or 'the Indian subcontinent'. In the earliest history of such an area, people presumably lived in small isolated communities with little contact. This first level can therefore be referred to as a 'proto-region', or a 'pre-regional zone', since there is no organized international/world society in this situation.

However, some translocal relations are bound to develop rather early. Premodern exchange systems tend to be based on symbolic kinship bonds rather than expectations associated with market behaviour. Premarket transactions, which Karl Polanyi (1956) referred to as 'embedded', contained an important element of diplomacy and the creation of trust between isolated communities experiencing occasional 'encounters'. In order to further regionalize, this particular territory must, necessarily, experience increasing interaction and more frequent contact between human communities, which after living as 'isolated' groupings are moving towards some kind of translocal relationship, giving rise to a regional social system or what will be called regional complex below.

### *Regional complex*

Increased social contacts and transactions between previously more isolated groups — the creation of a social system — facilitates some sort of regionness, albeit on a low level. The creation of Latin Christendom between 800 and 1200, which also implied the birth of a European identity, is a case in point.<sup>14</sup> Such early relations of interdependence also constitute a regional complex and indicate the real starting point for the regionalization process.<sup>15</sup>

The emergence of a regional complex thus implies ever widening translocal relations — positive and/or negative — between human groups and influences between cultures ('little traditions'). It is reasonable to assume that regional identities may be

---

<sup>13</sup> It should be clear that we draw attention to what is now a crucial element of alternative development theory, namely the territorial principle as distinct from the functional principle and the 'end of geography' thesis, cf. Hettne 1995a: 199-206.

<sup>14</sup> Bartlett, 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Barry Buzan's regional security complexes (Buzan, 1991).

historically deep-seated. Hence it is necessary to take a longer historical perspective than simply the nation-building period, e.g. the Westphalian era in European and international history (i.e. the establishment of a global state-system). This is of particular importance in the South where the state system is much more recent, feeble and often quite artificial. It is in many parts of the world quite likely that an erosion of nation-states will strengthen regional identity. This may happen in Europe as well.

The creation of states — state-formation and nation-building — leads to a consolidation of national territories which for a time (the Westphalian era of Europe) implies a more inward orientation, and usually means a temporary decline in the level of regionness, which has a counterpart in the postcolonial creation of states in Latin America during the 19th century and in Asia and Africa after the Second World War. The territorial states by definition monopolize all external relations and decide who are friend or foe, which implies a discouragement of regional consciousness. The existing social relations in a nation-state system may very well be hostile and completely lacking in cooperation. In fact this is a defining feature of a nation-state system according to the dominant theoretical school in IR. The people of the separate ‘nation-states’ are not likely to have much knowledge of or mutual trust in each other, much less a shared identity. Regional identity is suppressed. When the states relax their ‘inward-orientedness’ and become more open to external relations, the degree of transnational contact may increase dramatically, which may trigger a process of further regionalization in various fields.

In security terms the region at this level is best understood as a ‘conflict formation’ or a ‘regional (in)security complex’, in which the constituent units, as far as their own security is concerned, are dependent on each other as well as on the overall stability of the regional system.<sup>16</sup> The region, just like the larger international system of which it forms part, can therefore on this level of regionness be described as anarchic with territorial states as the only relevant actors. The classic case of such a regional order is 19th century Europe. At this low level of regionness, a balance of power, or some kind of ‘concert’, is the sole security guarantee for the states constituting the system. This is a rather primitive security mechanism. We could therefore talk of a ‘primitive’ region, exemplified by the Balkans today and, as far as political security is concerned (in spite of a high degree of spontaneous economic regionalization) by East Asia.

Similarly to security matters, the political economy of development can be understood as ‘anarchic’, implying that there exists no transnational welfare mechanism which can ensure a functioning regional economic system. In Europe this is the legacy of

---

<sup>16</sup> Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1998.

the mercantilism associated with nation-building, which in the Third World has its counterpart in the dependency/economic nationalism/intervention syndrome. The patterns of economic interdependencies tend to be exploitative rather than cooperative and mutually reinforcing, often resulting in hostile protectionism, trade wars, beggar-thy-neighbour policies, relative gain-seeking and various strategies to isolate the 'national' economies from the negative effects of the larger regional (and of course global) economic system they form part of, while at the same time trying to exploit the opportunities of the same system(s). The actors may also look towards the larger external system rather than the region. There is no shared sense of 'sitting in the same boat'. Exchanges and economic interactions are unstable, short-sighted and based on myopic self-interest rather than dependable expectations of economic reciprocity, social communication and mutual trust. This is inherent in the ideology of globalism.

### *Regional society*

This is the level where the crucial regionalization process develops and intensifies, in the sense that a number of different actors apart from states appear on different societal levels and move towards transcendence of national space, making use of a more rule-based pattern of relations. The dynamics of this process can be described as a deepening as well as broadening along several dimensions, economic as well as political and cultural, i.e. multidimensional regionalization. There are several processes of communication and interaction emerging on parallel tracks between a multitude of actors. This rise in intensity, scope and width may come about through formalized regional cooperation or more spontaneously.

In the case of more formally organized cooperation, the region is defined by the members of the regional organization in question. In most conventional analysis this is the only region acknowledged as such. This more organized region, which we look upon as a second order phenomenon, could be called the 'formal' or *de jure* region. In order to assess the relevance and future potential of a particular regional organization, it should be possible to relate the 'formal region' to the 'real region', which has to be defined in terms of potentialities, *de facto* regionalization, convergencies and through other less precise criteria.<sup>17</sup>

This level can be referred to as a regional form of international society as used in the English School, but (and this is the major difference) not confined simply to state relations. With lower degrees of regionness, the regional dynamics is often dominated by

---

<sup>17</sup> Oman 1994; also see Hettne, Inotai and Sunkel 1999.

a state-centric logic, but increasing interdependence and relaxed inward-orientation, which is typical of this level of regionness, give rise to a complex interaction between all types of actors, including the wide range of 'non-state', transnational actors from markets, private business and firms, transnational corporations (TNCs), transnational business networks, NGOs, social movements and other types of social networks formed on the basis of professional, ideological, ethnic or religious ties, which contribute to the formation of a transnational regional economy and regional civil society.

The crucial question is therefore to understand how the region is constructed in the interplay between various types of state-, market- and civil society-actors in various regions, i.e. including the 'foreign policies' of local and provincial authorities and non-state, transnational agents, as well as the fact that external actors can be actively engaged in the process of region-building. This does not mean that the so-called nation-states are becoming obsolete or disappearing, but rather that they are undergoing major restructuring in the context of regionalization (and globalization) and the complex interplay of state-market-society relations. It also means that they end up as semi-independent parts of larger regional political societies.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to recognize that the relationships and strengths of the 'formal' and the 'real' region, between state and non-state actors, differ in time and space. The great pluralism of the ways in which the market, the state and civil society interact in the context of globalization reflects the diversity of geographic and socio-economic conditions under which they arise. Various dimensions of regionalisms and regionalizations occur at different spatial levels of regions, which to a large extent are all related to one another (and therefore must be understood within the same framework). Particularly important is therefore to explicitly integrate 'micro-regions' and micro-regionalisms into the analytical framework.

Micro-regionalism is related to macro-regionalism in the way that the larger regionalization (and globalization) processes create possibilities for smaller economically dynamic sub-national or transnational regions to get a direct access to the larger economic system, often bypassing the nation-state and the national capital, and sometimes even as an alternative or in opposition to the challenged state and to formal state-regionalisms.

---

<sup>18</sup> In our view, relaxed 'inward-orientation' and increased interdependencies do not simply imply a rise of 'globalization', which seems to be the conventionally held view today, but may instead result in increased regionalization (and/or that regionalization arises when the negative effects of the globalization become more evident).

There is a diverse pattern of micro-regions in the world today. The Euro-regions are well-known examples, which must be understood in their particular European context. In other parts of the world, mainly Asia and Africa, micro-regions, as illustrated by the concepts of growth polygons, growth triangles, development corridors, spatial development initiatives, cross-border regions, are often state-assisted with a weak degree of institutionalization while at the same time being private sector-led, market-driven, thus involving a high degree of interactions initiated by non-state actors and inter-personal transnational networks (e.g. diasporas, ethnic or family networks, religious ties, etc).<sup>19</sup>

In order to further regionalize, the great diversity of processes at various levels (i.e. macro-micro) and between state, market and civil society agents must to an increasing extent become mutually reinforcing and evolve in a similar or complementary rather than competitive and diverging direction. The increasing and widening relationships between the formal and the real region lead to an institutionalization of cognitive structures and a gradual deepening of mutual trust and responsiveness. Formal organizations and social institutions (and both material and normative forces) are expected to play a crucial role in this process leading towards community and region-building.

### *Regional community*

The fourth level of regionness refers to the process whereby the region increasingly turns into an active subject with a distinct identity, institutionalized or informal actor capability, legitimacy, and structure of decision-making, in relation with a more or less responsive regional civil society, transcending the old state borders. It implies a convergence and compatibility of the often many and sometimes contradictory regional ideas, organizations and processes within a particular region.

In security terms, to continue this line of argument, the reference is to 'security community', and its recent rediscovery<sup>20</sup>, which means that the level of regionness achieved makes it inconceivable to solve conflicts by violent means, between as well as within former states. With regard to development, the regional sphere is not merely reduced to a 'market', but there exist also regional mechanisms that can offset the polarization effects inherent in the market and ensure social security, regional balance and welfare, with similar albeit still embryonic functions as in the old states.

---

<sup>19</sup> cf. Bøås and Hveem 1999; Mittelman, 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Adler and Barnett 1998.

A regional community is characterized by a mutually reinforcing relationship between the ‘formal’ region, defined by the community of states, and the ‘real’ region, in which a transnationalized regional civil society also has a role to play. The regional civil society may emerge spontaneously from ‘below’, but is ultimately dependent on that enduring (formal and informal) institutions and ‘regimes’ facilitate and promote security, welfare, social communication and convergence of values, norms, identities and actions throughout the region. A regional collective identity has emerged and the relations are characterized by mutual trust and confidence building, which is driven by social learning. As Adler and Barnett correctly draws attention to: ‘Learning increases the knowledge that the individuals have not just about each others’ purposes and intentions but also of each others’ interpretations of society, politics, economics, and culture; to the extent that these interpretations are increasingly shared and disseminated across national boundaries, the stage has been laid for the development of a regional collective identity.’<sup>21</sup>

The micro-regions do not disappear at this stage. On the contrary, they often flourish and become a permanent feature of the region, thus contributing to the diversity and increasing level of cross-border relations within the larger macro-region. A dense pattern of micro-regions is gradually emerging, and as they become more dynamic and stronger, they also contribute to increased relations between the various micro-regions. At such high levels of regionness, the pattern of micro-regions will not have alternative visions of the larger macro-region, but thus relate to it in a similar and mutually reinforcing manner.

With increasing levels of regional community, the dividing line between the separate (and often artificial) national communities within the region gradually disappears and differentiation is increasingly between those within from those outside the region. The region can in this sense be the organizing basis for relationships within the region or be defining relations to the rest of the world.<sup>22</sup> This implies thus a radical shift away from how the world has been organized in the Westphalian era. However, just like nation-states, all regions are to a certain extent ‘imagined’, subjectively defined and cognitive constructions. In order to be successful, regionalization necessitates a certain degree of compatibility of culture, identity and fundamental values.

A shared cultural tradition — an inherent regional civil society — in a particular region is often of importance here, particularly for more informal forms of regionalization. However, it must be remembered that culture is not given, but continuously created and recreated. The defining element is rather the multidimensional

---

<sup>21</sup> Adler and Barnett 1998: 54.

<sup>22</sup> Hurrell 1995.

and voluntary quality of regional interaction, and the societal characteristics indicating an emerging regional community. Some examples are the Nordic group of countries and North America (gradually including Mexico), and on their way the Southern Cone of South America and the (at least original) members of ASEAN. The established community spirit may be negatively affected by opportunistic and politically motivated inclusion of new unprepared members, such as the surprising cooptation of the Democratic Republic of Congo into SADC.

### *Region-state*

Characteristic of the still hypothetical fifth level of regionness, the processes shaping the 'formal' and 'real' region are similar but by no means identical to state-formation and nation-building, and the ultimate outcome could be a region-state, which in terms of scope and cultural heterogeneity can be compared to the classical empires. A region-state must be distinguished from a nation-state. Just like there are many types of nation-states, there will be different types of 'region-states'. Furthermore, the political logic of regionalization is somewhat different compared to a nation-state. Homogenization within a region cannot (as in the nation-state) imply cultural standardization in accordance with one specific ethnic model, but rather compatibility between differences within a pluralist culture. Such world regions are per definition multicultural and pluralistic. They cannot be based on force or domination of power, which would gradually imply that they explode from within, as illustrated by the Soviet empire and some African states.

In terms of political order a region-state constitutes a voluntary evolution of a group of formerly sovereign national communities into a new form of political entity, where sovereignty is pooled for the best of all, and which is radically more democratic in character than other 'international' polities. National interests may prevail but do not become identical with nation-states. Moreover, authority, power and decision-making are not centralized but layered and decentralized to the local, micro-regional, national and macro-regional/supranational levels. This is basically the idea of the EU as outlined in the Maastricht Treaty. The three pillars — market integration, external security and internal security — together with the social dimension, implying a European form of more or less regulated welfare capitalism, do cover the essential functions of an organized political community. There is no doubt whatsoever that the relationship between these functions — theorized in the form of 'spill-over effects' in the old regionalism — sooner or later will appear as a matter of course. For other regions this may be far into the future, but should by no means be ruled out. Stranger things have happened in history. Besides, we do not suggest any repetitions of a European path,

simply that the decreasing nation-state capacity will give room for a multilevel governance structure where the regional level for historical and pragmatic reasons will play a significant role.

### **Regionness and security communities**

Before concluding the discussion on regionness we want to point to a recent approach elaborated by Adler and Barnett in the study of security communities. There are some important similarities between our own effort to construct a NRT, built around the core concept of regionness, and Adler and Barnett's three-tiered framework with: (i) precipitating conditions (change in technology, demography, economics, the environment; development of new interpretations of social reality; external threats); (ii) process variables (transactions, organizations and social learning) and structural variables (power and knowledge); and (iii) mutual trust and collective identity, which is then combined with three phases in the development of a security community — 'nascent', 'ascendant' and 'mature'.

However, the differences between our two approaches should also be highlighted, which will help to further define the NRT.

(1) Adler and Barnett start from a system of states, whereas our idea of NRT can be applied also to historical periods that precede the state system. That is, we view the formation of regions and transnational communities in a longer historical perspective compared to Adler and Barnett, and claim that the origins of regionness, particularly its cultural dimension, can be traced far back in history.

(2) Closely related to this, and seemingly in contrast to Adler and Barnett, we emphasize that in certain parts of the world, for instance Africa, other types of political communities than the so-called nation-states have been the providers of security and welfare. The nation-states have thus failed, since they were artificial 'creatures' from the outset, and been part of the problem of insecurity (i.e. 'the Westfailure system'). Consequently they cannot be the only units of analysis from where security and development studies takes its point of departure. Compared to the particular strand of social constructivism that Adler and Barnett are associated with, we are inclined to argue that the NRT is less state-centric, less 'formal' and more explicitly includes the agency of non-state actors and transnational forces.

(3) Whereas Adler and Barnett claim that security communities do not have to be geographically contiguous and not tied to space, territoriality as basis for community is basic to our approach. Even if their examples are based on regional organizations such as

EU, NAFTA and ASEAN, their conception of security community is not necessarily regional in the territorial sense.

(4) Although Adler and Barnett, to some extent, fruitfully pay attention to socio-economic development, they are concerned with non-war communities and ‘negative peace’, whereas the NRT is founded on that security, peace, the political economy of development and culture should be integrated within the same analytical framework, thus emphasizing the natural relationship rather than the differences between these phenomena.

(5) Although Adler and Barnett certainly recognize the phenomenon, we believe that the NRT framework is more ‘global’ in nature and explicitly takes into consideration that regionalization is constructed in the overall context of globalization.

### **Conclusion: Towards a NRT research agenda**

The ‘new regionalism’ in world politics is still in search of theory. If we have made but a small contribution to this, we have succeeded in our effort. We have discussed some meta-theoretical postulates, the most important being that in the present world order, relevant social science theory is global social theory. The social constructivist approach was also mentioned as one theoretical building block for the construction of the NRT, bearing in mind that regions are large ‘imagined communities’. The comparative approach was seen as one important step towards theory, and a framework based on the concept of regionness was built for that purpose. In order to assess to what extent the regionness concept is capable of generating explanations of current processes of regionalization in various contexts and cases, more focussed comparative case studies are needed. It is important to note that the regionalization processes are related to globalization processes, as noted in our discussion on global social theory, and that globalization and regionalization processes interact under different conditions of regionness, creating a variety of pathways of regionalization.

The five levels of regionness — regional area, regional complex, regional society, regional community and finally region-state — may express a certain evolutionary logic. They represent as it were the ‘natural history’ of regionalism, as distinct from the ‘real history’ of various regionalisms. However, the idea is not to suggest a stage theory, because there is nothing deterministic or inherently evolutionary about regionalism. As

emphasized above, we do not anticipate a single path or detailed ‘series of stages’ that are exactly the same for all regions and that must be passed in order for higher levels of regionness to occur. Since globalization is the main contemporary challenge, many regionalization experiments are initiated from quite different starting points in terms of regionness. Moreover, since regions are political and social projects, devised by human actors in order to protect or transform existing structures, they may, just like nation-state projects before them, fail. Regions can be disrupted from within and from without, by the same forces that build them up. Since a region can be constructed it can also be deconstructed, ideationally and materially.<sup>23</sup> Integration and disintegration go hand in hand (albeit at different levels), and at each stage there are disintegrative forces and the possibility of spill-back. Other processes such as globalization, nation-building and fragmentation may dominate, possibly in combination with other more negative forms of regional scenarios than the one outlined in this article, e.g. hostile regional ‘fortresses’ or ‘open’, neo-liberal regions serving as temporary ‘stepping-stones’ to multilateralism.

However, after a process of regionalization has started, it appears as if different logics begin to develop, expressing a certain evolutionary or irreversible logic. In our view mainstream theories in the field do not adequately explain such multidimensional increase and later consolidation of the processes of regionalization. For instance, we agree with Hurrell that ‘neo-realists may be right to stress the importance of the geo-political context in the early stages of European unity, and yet wrong in ignoring the degree to which both informal integration and successful institutionalization altered the dynamics of European international relations over the following forty years.’<sup>24</sup> There are important gaps in the theoretical explanation of many other regionalization processes in the world today, for instance Southern Africa, West Africa, South America, and East and Southeast Asia. Needless to say, existing theories in the field may help us understand parts of these regionalization processes, but it is our conviction that a more multidisciplinary and comprehensive theoretical construct is required to see beyond particular aspects and cases. A long historical perspective is needed and it is necessary to avoid the fetishism of formal organization.

The concept of regionness is heuristic, it constitutes a natural history of regionalization, which makes it easier to pinpoint the specificities of real world regionalizations. Between regionness and theory there is a need for comparative research based on issues which are significant for theory-building in that they refer to the constitutive elements of each ‘natural history phase of regionalization’.

---

<sup>23</sup> Adler and Barnett 1998: 58.

<sup>24</sup> Hurrell 1995: 73.

Since the regions are structurally very different with regard to their external relations, as well as varying with respect to their internal conditions, for instance in terms of 'regionness', we can distinguish between at least two different comparative approaches, which preferably should be combined. One possibility is to compare structurally different regional formations with respect to the kind of position they hold in the global system, positions which can be seen as an outcome of the various pathways of regionalization. Some regions are hegemonic, others are poor and dependent. Questions that then arise are: what are the characteristics and causes of these varying positions, what inherent interests are linked to them, and how may structural changes be brought about? This approach will enhance our understanding of the structure and dynamics of the world system as such, rather than about what goes on in any particular region. Hettne has distinguished elsewhere among Core, Intermediate and Peripheral structural positions defined by two criteria: economic dynamism and political stability.<sup>25</sup> These qualities can in fact be achieved without much regional integration or coordination in political terms; i.e. through natural and spontaneous convergencies, but it is hypothesized that relatively poor and turbulent regions need to approach these problems jointly on a regional level, by means of security regionalism and development regionalism. This leads us to the issue of internal conditions in various types of regions, as well as to a greater emphasis on the behaviour of actors and their degree of freedom.

The other comparative approach, explored in this article, is thus to compare regions with regard to degrees of 'regionness', a concept which in turn contains several dimensions such as cultural affinity, political regimes, security arrangements and economic policies. Questions arising are the relative importance of these dimensions, how they relate dynamically, and the role played by different type of actors, from states, markets and civil societies (including the fact that external actors also take part in the process of region-building). The concept of regionness has to do with the degree of increasing cooperation, integration and relative 'sameness'; i.e. the convergence of several dimensions and the resulting regional coherence and complementarity. Are there typical sequences (or 'spill-overs') in these convergencies?

Regionalization takes place at different spatial levels. It has been argued that macro-regionalism and micro-regionalism form part of the same process of 'new regionalism', but we definitely need to know more about the phenomenon of micro-regionalism. To what extent does it operate according to one single logic or is it rather a heterogeneous phenomenon? A major challenge of moving the research frontier forward is to analyze the relationship between macro-regionalism and micro-regionalism.

---

<sup>25</sup> Hettne 1997; Hettne, Inotai and Sunkel 1999.

We have placed emphasis on that the actors behind regionalist projects are not states only, but a large number of different types of institutions, organisations and movements and non-state actors, such as domestic firms, transnational corporations, NGOs and other types of social networks and social movements. Together they contribute to the formation of a ('real') transnational regional economy and civil society. It seems as if economic, social and cultural networks are developing more quickly than the formal political cooperation at the regional level. We therefore need detailed empirical (comparative case) studies on the strength and relationship between various types of state-, market- and civil society-induced processes of regionalization.

## Bibliography

- Adler, Emmanuel and Michael Barnett (eds) (1998) *Security Communities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Africa Today* (1997) 'The Future of Regional Studies', Volume 44, No 2 April-June.
- Axline, Andrew W (ed) (1994) *The Political Economy of Regional Cooperation. Comparative Case Studies*. London: Pinter Publisher.
- Bartlett, Robert (1993) *The Making of Europe: Conquest, colonization and cultural change 950 – 1350*. Penguin Books.
- Baylis, John and Steve Smith (eds) (1997) *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Buzan, Barry (1991) *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for in International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, Hempel Hempstead:Harvester-Wheatsheaf.
- Buzan, Barry, Waever, Ole and Jaap de Wilde (1998) *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. London: Lynne Rienner.
- Bøås, Morten and Helge Hveem (1999) 'Regionalisms Compared: the African and Southeast Asian experience' in Hettne, Inotai and Sunkel, Volume 5.
- Cable, Vincent and David Henderson (eds) (1994) *Trade Blocs? The Future of Regional Integration*. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.
- Checkel, Jeffrey (1998) 'The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory'. *World Politics* 50: 324-48.
- Coleman, William D. and Geoffrey R.D. Underhill (eds) (1998) *Regionalism & Global Economic Integration. Europe, Asia and the Americas*. London: Routledge.
- Cox, Robert (1996) *Approaches to World Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cox, Robert (ed) (1997) *The New Realism. Perspectives on Multilateralism and World Order*. London/Helsinki: Macmillan Press and United Nations University Press.
- de Melo, Jaime and Arvind Panagariya (eds) (1993) *New Dimensions in Regional Integration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fawcett, Louise and Andrew Hurrell (eds) (1995) *Regionalism in World Politics. Regional Organization and International Order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gamble, Andrew and Anthony Payne (eds) (1996) *Regionalism and World Order*. London: Macmillan.
- Hettne, Björn (1993) 'Neo-Mercantilism: The Pursuit of Regionness'. *Cooperation & Conflict* 28 (3): 211-232.

- Hettne, Björn (1995a) *Development Theory and the Three Worlds. Towards an International Political Economy of Development*, London: Longman. (1990).
- Hettne, Björn (ed) (1995b) *International Political Economy. Understanding Global Disorder*. London: Zed Books.
- Hettne, Björn (1997) 'Development, Security and World Order: A Regionalist Approach', *European Journal of Development Research*, Vol 9, No 1, June, pp. 83-106.
- Hettne, Björn and Fredrik Söderbaum (eds) (1998) *Special Issue: The New Regionalism. Politeia*. Vol 17, No 3.
- Hettne, B. Inotai, A. and O. Sunkel (eds) (1999) *Studies in the New Regionalism. Volume I-V*. London. Macmillan Press.
- Hurrell, Andrew (1995) 'Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective' in Fawcett, Louise & Andrew Hurrell (eds) *Regionalism in World Politics. Regional Organization and International Order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keating, Michael and John Loughlin (eds) (1997) *The Political Economy of Regionalism*. London: Frank Cass.
- Mittelman, James H (1999) 'Subregional Responses to Globalization: a comparative analysis' in Hettne, Inotai and Sunkel, Volume 5.
- Murphy Craig N. and Roger Tooze (eds) (1991) *The New International Political Economy*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Neufeld, Mark (1995) *The Restructuring of International Relations Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nye, Joseph (1971) *Peace in Parts. Integration and Conflict in Regional Organization*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company.
- Ohmae, Kenichi, (1995) *The End of the Nation State. The Rise of Regional Economies*. London: HarperCollins.
- Oman, Charles (1994) *Globalisation and Regionalisation: The Challenge for Developing Countries*. Paris: OECD.
- Payne, Anthony (1998) 'The New Political Economy of Area Studies', *Millenium*, Vol 27, No 2 September.
- Polanyi, Karl (1956) *The Great Transformation*. Boston: Beacon Press (1971).
- Rosenau, James N. and Mary Durfee, (1995) *Thinking Theory Thoroughly. Coherent Approaches to an Incoherent World*, Boulder: Westview Press.
- Ruggie, John G. (1998) *Constructing the World Polity*. London: Routledge.

- Smith, Steve (1997) 'New Approaches to International Theory', in Baylis and Smith (eds).
- Stallings, Barbara (ed) 1995. *Global Change, Regional Response: The New International Context of Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strange, Susan (1999) 'The Westfailure System', *Review of International Studies*, 25, 345-354.
- Wendt, Alexander (1992) 'Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, Vol 46, No 2, Spring.
- World Politics* (1995) 'The Role of Theory in Comparative Politics. A Symposium.' Vol. 48, No 1, October.