Do Regional Institutions Transmit Global or Regional Norms and Values?

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The post-Cold War era has witnessed a notable increase in the number and membership of regional institutions across the globe, and with it recognition of the growing importance of their role within the international system (Fawcett, 2005). This paper is directed towards the question of whether such institutions can be said to transmit primarily global or regional norms and values. Proceeding in three parts, the paper begins by outlining its theoretical approach in privileging a constructivist account of regions. It then looks in turn at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU), describing the normative frameworks particular to each, and the manner in which they are promoted, before concluding by noting the primacy of regional over global norms and values.

The Social Construction of Regions

In adopting a constructivist meta-theoretical approach, this paper sees regions as based on shared intersubjective understandings, and norms as being both regulative and constitutive in nature. Rationalists, it should be noted, view regional integration and normative structures in a different light. The neorealist view, for example, is one of an anarchic international system dictating a Hobbesian self-help world of conflictual interstate relations. Inhabited by rational egoistic actors, their behaviour reflects calculations of self-interest based primarily on the international distribution of power, whereby

“the most powerful states… create and shape institutions so that they can maintain their share of world power, or increase it. [Institutions] are essentially ‘arenas for acting out power relationships’” (Mearsheimer, 1994: 13).

Neoliberal institutionalists differ in seeing institutions as capable of facilitating interstate cooperation via the alleviation of collective action problems, for the achievement of absolute rather than relative gains (Sterling-Folker, 2010). However, norms nonetheless still possess a distinctly functional role (Checkel, 1999).

Constructivists, by way of contrast, place greater emphasis on the social content of norms and their role in constituting the socially constructed reality of international relations. Anarchy does not determine actors’ behaviour as rationalists suggest – instead, shared intersubjective understandings shape actors’ identities and interests. Structure and agent are mutually constitutive, and ‘anarchy is what states make of it’ (Wendt, 1992). Regional interaction and integration means that “by engaging in cooperative behaviour… actors are simultaneously learning to identify with each other – to see themselves as a “we” bound by certain norms” (Wendt, 1994: 390). Regions are therefore to be seen as socially constructed ‘imagined communities,’ with distinct identities shaped by locally-specific norms and values.

There are distinct similarities here, of course, to the older English School view that a *society* of states is formed when “conscious of certain common interests and common values, [states feel] bound by a common set of rules… and share in the working of common institutions” (Bull, 1995: 13). Indeed, Narine (2006) and Diez and Whitman (2002) have offered respective accounts of how ASEAN and the EU can be considered regional international societies. An English School approach also provides useful historical illustration in the evolution of contemporary global

international society and its Westphalian normative structure. As Watson (2009: 210) notes, while the majority of its members are now non-European, "the rules and institutions [of global international society] are still largely inherited from Europe, and it was generally perceived until quite recently as merely the European society writ large." The promotion and diffusion of regional norms and values at the international level, therefore, is clearly a long-standing – if constantly evolving – phenomenon in international relations.

The transmission of norms and values remains, of course, a somewhat dynamic and multi-directional process. It may be that relatively powerful regional actors such as the EU are rather more likely to be norm-makers than norm-takers, with weaker actors such as ASEAN tending to find a different balance. Using the latter institution as an example, Acharya (2004: 269) describes how transnational norms are often incorporated through a process of 'localization', in which "local agents… promote norm diffusion by actively borrowing and modifying transnational norms in accordance with their pre-constructed normative beliefs and practices". Regional institutions, along with their constituent members, can therefore also play a crucial role in the rejection or incorporation of external norms.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations

The regional institution of ASEAN was formed on 8 August 1967 by the five major non-communist states of the region – those of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Membership has since grown with the admission of Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999). ASEAN's founding aims were threefold – to soothe intra-regional tensions, promote socio-economic development, and reduce the influence of external powers (Narine, 2008). While the 1967 Bangkok Declaration provided a useful forum for informal cooperation, it was however "little more than a statement of good intentions [and] did not set up any institutional or legal frameworks" (Wunderlich, 2007: 82). The same was true of the 1971 Declaration on a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), which aimed to keep Southeast Asia free of interference from outside powers. Not until 1976 did the ASEAN heads of state meet together formally, resulting in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), which laid out the fundamental principles that still govern conduct within the region (ASEAN, 2011).

The formation of ASEAN within its particular cultural-historical context has seen it develop a distinct set of regional norms often dubbed the 'ASEAN way' (Wunderlich, 2007: 151-156). These can be divided into legal-rational and socio-cultural norms. The former – as set out in the TAC – include the non-use of force, non-interference, and regional autonomy, and as Narine (2008: 413) notes are "derived from the standard principles of the Westphalian state system [and] protect and reinforce the overarching norm of respect for state sovereignty". Two historical factors should be borne in mind here. One is the context of weak post-colonial states, common throughout the Cold War-era developing world, anxious to protect their sovereignty and further the state-building process. A second is the relative diversity of ASEAN's member states in political, economic, and cultural terms, and which provides only a weak basis for regional identity (Wunderlich, 2007: 152-155).

The socio-cultural norms of ASEAN are what is considered to make it particularly distinctive, with an avowed preference for informality, organizational minimalism, and consensual decision-making (Narine, 2008), These are usually identified as being derived from traditional Javanese practices of *musyawarah* (consultation) and *muafakat* (consensus) (Wunderlich, 2007: 155). While these socio-cultural norms and values are clearly more unique to the region, it is also their co-mingling with a (strict) interpretation of legal-rational Westphalian norms that help shape the identity of the region and socialise both members and associates of ASEAN. In this sense, it can be seen that ASEAN as institutional and constitutive practice is a combination of both regional and 'localized' global norms and values (Acharya, 2004).

The admission and continued membership of Myanmar is a useful illustration of these main aspects of ASEAN's normative framework. While a minority of member states were initially reluctant to extend membership to the country owing to its dire human rights record, a consensus position was eventually reached. Western pressure to exclude Myanmar was also arguably counterproductive, providing an 'other' against which ASEAN's collective identity asserted itself through the primacy of regional non-interference norms over global human rights norms (Nischalke, 2002). However, the continuing normative evolution of international standards and sovereign responsibilities has

maintained the controversy over Myanmar's status. While Thailand's advocacy of 'flexible engagement' was seen as excessively challenging to the non-intervention norm, a milder policy of 'enhanced interaction' with Myanmar was adopted by ASEAN that has nonetheless led to increasingly outspoken criticisms of the regime (Alden, 2010: 11-12). Alongside this, the creation of the ASEAN Charter, ratified in 2008, has seen the codification of human rights and democracy promotion within the region. Although both reflecting and further contributing to the modifying of the region's traditional norms and values, ASEAN's 'critical disengagement' (Jones, 2008) from the situation in Myanmar provides evidence so far of a continuing preference for only limited intraregional interference (Haacke, 2010).

The European Union

From its origins as a six member 'Western' club of states that signed the Treaty of Rome in 1957, to the pan-European twenty-seven-member organisation that exists today, the EU has developed an integrated regional framework of unparalleled depth and sophistication. In distinct contrast to ASEAN, this involves a proliferation of formal institutional arrangements that include a combination of intergovernmental and supranational elements. This encompasses, *inter alia*, a binding system of European law, a single market promoting free movement of goods, services, people and capital, a common currency, and varying degrees of policy responsibility over a number of issue areas (McCormick, 2005). Where ASEAN was conceived as a means to strengthen and protect the region's nascent Westphalian states, the pooling and delegating of sovereignty that has occurred within the EU has been a conscious effort to create a post-Westphalian answer to the question of how to reconcile Europe's long history of inter-state conflict and rivalry (Wunderlich, 2007: 159-160).

Integration and accompanying socialisation has contributed to the further development of shared norms and values within the EU. As Olli Rehn (2005), then-EU Commissioner for Enlargement, has argued:

"…Europe is defined in the minds of Europeans. Geography sets the frame, but fundamentally it is values that make the borders of Europe… the most fundamental of which are liberty and solidarity, tolerance and human rights, democracy and the rule of law."

This constitutive normative structure, expressed in various EU treaties, declarations and policies, is encapsulated in the so-called 'Copenhagen Criteria' of 1993 that set out future membership conditions (also included were the necessity of a well-functioning market economy and the ability to take on the obligations of the *acquis communitaire,* the cumulative body of EU laws). As Wunderlich (2007:143) notes, while these norms and values may not be unique to the EU,

"what makes the EU distinctive is the way these norms and principles impact on the member-states, [restricting] the range of political choices [and changing] the way these member-states perceive themselves and their national interests."

The transmission and exercise of EU norms and values has been particularly evident through the enlargement process, as seen with the gradual extension of membership to the majority of Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs). This process involved the adoption of the EU's normative framework by a variety of – mostly small and relatively poor – ex-communist dictatorships, during which the EU's structural dominance in both material and ideational terms allowed it to benignly apply a wide-ranging and highly intrusive package of conditionalities without significant dissension (Zielonka, 2007: 57). More recently, the continuing accession process has also been a "key anchor in supporting democratization and modernization" in Turkey (Tocci, 2005: 82), as EU norms and values are localized by domestic Turkish actors as a way of redefining Kemalism to be more appropriate for the twenty-first century. Attempts to promote EU norms and values via the European Neighbourhood Policy and associated programmes have, however, been more problematic (Zielonka, 2008). The greater cultural differences of these neighbouring states as compared to the CEECs, combined with the absence of future membership conditionality, have meant that the Union's ideational and material power is comparatively limited.

Zielonka (2007) has also likened the EU to a benign neo-medieval empire, given its apparently fuzzy borders,

polycentric governance, and this identifiably 'soft' form of external power projection. Ian Manners (2002: 242) meanwhile goes further in suggesting that the EU is now best conceived of internationally not in civilian or military power terms, but as a considerable "*normative power*… it exists as being different to pre-existing political forms [and] this difference pre-disposes it to act in a normative way". The EU, by virtue of its unique identity, is increasingly committed to placing 'universal' norms and principles at the centre of its external relations, often in contradiction to its material interests – promotion of worldwide abolition of the death penalty, environmental protections, and international criminal justice are among the most prominent examples here (Manners, 2002; Groenleer and Van Schaik, 2007).

Conclusion

While the European Union's advocacy of ostensibly 'global' norms and values raises broader issues of political philosophy concerning the universal and the particular, exploration of such issues is beyond the scope of this paper. What the above has demonstrated are the differences and similarities observable between regional institutions, and the ways in which they illustrate the place of the regional and the global. Whether explained via material or ideational motivations, the EU's projection of normative power remains a clear example that

"the West generally is still playing the role of vanguard to global interstate society, pressing its own values and institutions onto societies that in varying degrees want to resist them, and which use the earlier round of pluralist institutions (especially sovereignty, territoriality, diplomacy) to do so" (Buzan, 2004: 237).

ASEAN's changing nature also provides evidence of the localization of global norms and values regarding contemporary sovereign responsibilities such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. What is also clear from both examples, however, is that distinct regional identities shaped by local history and culture allow for continuing differences in the interpretation and practice of such phenomena, and are evidence in that sense of regional institutions being regulated and constituted by primarily regional norms and values.

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