

What Are the Hindrances to the Study of Regionalism?

Written by Albert Hayrapetyan

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ALBERT HAYRAPETYAN, OCT 2 2020

The study of regionalism is largely an 'unchartered water' as the number of scholarly pages dedicated to its study are insignificant vis-à-vis other areas such as war and security, terrorism, international organisations, etc. Certainly, a number of scholarly pieces were issued on the topics of specific regional formation, notably the European Union. However, the study of regionalism was encountered with a number of hindrances lingering the pace of development of the field. The article below will summarise and at the same time analyse all those impediments premised upon the existing academic literature. It will start with the discussion of the so-called 'major' problems that are more significant obstacles on the study of the field. Firstly, the core concepts such as 'region', 'regionalism', 'regionalisation', 'regionness', 'open regionalism' and 'new regionalism' will be duly defined and discussed. Afterwards, I will attempt to show that insufficient interaction among the theories has considerably undermined the holistic approach towards regionalism. And finally, I will try to briefly summarize the methodological issues that further complicated the study of regionalism. Once the major problems are discussed and summarized, I will briefly introduce the so-called 'minor' problems. The article will conclude with due regard to both major and minor problems, conceptual pluralism remains a paramount problem to the study of regionalism.

In the anarchic system of international relations, it was always believed that states are the only primary actors. Hence, the question above would have been considered odd probably throughout the whole history of humanity until the beginning of the 19th century. In particular, since 1980s, there has been an explosion of various forms of regionalisms rendered by a widening and deepening of the EU as well as the emergence of other regional projects such as the Organization of American States (OAS), the Association of South East Nations (ASEAN), the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and so on (de Lombaerde et al, 2010, p. 732). Consequently, regional convergence started to really matter and much attention was devoted to the study of regions. Nevertheless, as almost everything in our lives, the study of regionalism was not and is not smooth with a myriad of impediments challenging its way.

The study of regionalism encounters three interrelated **major** problems: 1. **Conceptual problem**, i.e. what is studied, 2. **Theoretical problem**, i.e. which theoretical framework to use and 3. **Methodological problem**, i.e. how to maintain the balance between qualitative and quantitative methods (de Lombaerde et al, 2010, p. 732).

The Conceptual Problem

The problem of adjacent concepts with a plethora of semantics may be deemed as another conceptual problem. Gerring identifies five criteria to judge the utility of the new concept: familiarity, resonance, parsimony, coherence and external differentiation (Gerring, 1999, pp. 366-383). Familiarity implies that the new concept shall not overlap with the existing ones. Resonance is about the catchiness of the concept and parsimony is about preciseness and simplicity of a concept (Gerring, 1999, pp. 366-383). Coherence, is an umbrella term incorporating both the connotation and denotation. In fact, any concept obtains meaning in conjuncture of its connotation and denotation. The former refers to definitional traits that give specific meaning to the term, while the latter is about the number of empirical phenomenon to which the application of the concept is appropriate. There is an inverse proportionality between this two, i.e. any increase of connotation decreases denotation and vice versa (Closa, 2015, p. 2). Finally, external differentiation demarcates the boundaries of the concept beyond which it cannot transcend. Putting otherwise, it is the flip side of coherence (Closa, 2015, p. 375). Against this backdrop, the meanings of the following adjacent concepts shall be addressed: 'regionalism', 'regionness', 'regionalisation', and 'new regionalism' 'regions',

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'open regionalism' and 'new regionalism'.

One of the challenges was to define "region" and "regionalism" scientifically. Both concepts have a myriad of definitions. Notably, most of them contain a notion about mutual interdependence, i.e. region and regionalism imply mutual interdependence of states on one another. "Regionalism", for example, is not a new concept, the usage of which dates back to 1960s or even before. In 1948, one of the pioneering books on regionalism was published by Panikkar, then Indian ambassador to China, who used the word to describe the armed neutrality of Northern powers, the concept of Mitteleuropa and so on (Acharya, 2012, p. 4). Closa cited Mansfield and Solingen who defined it as a policy of coordination through formal institutions, while Acharya views it as a purposive interaction, both formal and informal among state and non-state actors of a given area, in a pursuit of shared, external and transnational goals (Closa, 2015, p. 2). In addition, the understanding of the concept was challenged by the Latin American countries in the framework of power politics (Calvo Doctrine, Drago Doctrine) stressing the local (on the level of state) autonomy and non-intervention by the great powers.

The Calvo Doctrine, for example, named after Argentine diplomat and legal scholar Carlos Calvo, is a vivid example of legal nationalism. It advocates for the prohibition of foreign investors to resort the possible dispute to the court of their home countries. It excludes any diplomatic and military protection of foreign investors too. Similarly, the Drago Doctrine named after another Argentine diplomat Luis Maria Drago, rejects the rights of sovereign state to collect the debts by military means. At the same time, another often forgotten heritage of regionalism are ideologies and movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, such as Pan-Americanism, Pan-Africanism, Pan-Arabism and so on. They are seen as inter-societal rather than intergovernmental regionalisms (Acharya, 2012, p. 4). In addition, most of the definitions of regionalism were sovereignty-centred ignoring the bottom-up process of region building. Nevertheless, recent regionalism studies put emphasis on "soft" regionalism. Soft regionalism studies and acknowledges the cementing role of a variety of non-state actors such as firms and multinational corporations on region-shaping. Notwithstanding of this, the role of civil society is still mostly ignored.

And finally, regionness according to Hettne and Soderbaum refers to the "way to investigate the state of regionalization in various dimensions and contexts and to compare various situations" (Björn and Söderbaum, 2000, p.458). Regionalization, on the other hand, is described as increasing level of regionness, when the region is turned from a positive object to an active subject capable of articulating the interests of the emerging region. The distinction of "regionalisation" and "regionness" reminds us of the Marxist distinction between class in itself and class for itself (Closa, 2015, p. 2). According to Acharya, "Regionalisation is understood as different from regionalism in the sense that the former can be market-driven and less political, though not entirely apolitical." (Acharya, 2012, p. 12).

"Region" akin to "regionalism" is another polysemous concept. The classical definition of the region is given by Joseph Nye: "a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence" (Nye, 1971, P. 7). Nevertheless, no academic consensus was achieved over its definition hitherto. Historically, the term region was used with respect to sub-national or micro-regions, i.e. something in between the local and the national. Despite the valuable insights of export processing zones and growth triangles, micro regions are largely understudied. As for the sizes, it is not unequivocal that macro-regions are always bigger, since many of the Chinese or Russian regions, for example, are much bigger than Benelux. However, in current international affairs the concept "region" is also used with respect to the so-called macro-regionssuch as the EU or North-Rhine-Westphalia. Therefore, the definition of region depends on the research question which means that the concepts shall not be taken for granted. Nevertheless, one thing is more than clear – regions lack one major attribute intrinsic to states – sovereignty. This definition enabled us to distinguish among political, economic and social integration.

Another term lacking a clear and concise definition is open regionalism. Nevertheless, open regionalism most often implies an ideological movement rather than a descriptive concept which mainly advocates not only internal opening up inside the region, but also external opening up to other regions. It seeks compatibility between regional and global openness. Some leftist Latin American leaders opposed the idea of open regionalism associating it with the aspirations of the USA. They associate it with the alleged yearning of the USA to dominate over the rest of the world. They came up with an idea of post-liberal regionalism that led to initiatives such as Union of South American Nations

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(UNASUR) and Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America (ALBA) (Closa, 2015, p.7). Six main features distinguish post-liberal regionalism: 1. Dominance of the political factors over economic ones, 2. The recovery of aid agenda, 3. State leadership over market, 4. More emphasis on positive integration and the relevance of physical integration, 5. Greater relevance of the social questions (Closa, 2015. p.2-3).

And lastly, New Regionalism implies the changing heterogeneity of the region towards homogeneity in the dimensions of culture, security, political regimes and economic policies (Sbragia, 2008). There are two distinctive characteristics of New Regionalism. The first characteristic is the departure from Eurocentrism and focus on different regional formation. The second is the different region-shaping factors such as ideas, culture and identity. In rejection of EU-wise integration, an implicit (often explicit) assumption is brought forward that European integration is different from regionalism (Sbragia, 2008). New regionalism was also presented as a theory that came to fill the existent gaps in traditional/mainstream theories that underestimate the role of bottom-up initiatives and non-state actors in general (Acharya, 2012, p. 8). As we see, the concepts overall meet the above-stated criteria elaborated by Gerring.

The Theoretical Problem

Most of the theories that have tried to explain the problem of regionalism complement rather than compete each other. They focus on the different aspects of the phenomena (major historical events, cost-benefit of integration, spill-over mechanisms, etc.). Nevertheless, there is a weak level of communication between different theoretical viewpoints, especially between rationalists, constructivists and relativists. Therefore, comparisons might be viewed as an effective tool for different theories to communicate. They may offer an important starting point for theories to *have a useful debate or a constructive dialogue with one another* and eventually to influence one another.

In the academic literature there is a strong bias in favour of European integration theory which is not surprising, since the EU is indisputably second to none in terms of depth of integration. The institutions of the EU, especially the supranational ones, have significantly more power vis-à-vis their analogues in all the other regional formations and organizations. Furthermore, the history-making events mostly occurred in the old continent as several European powers used to be great empires till the mid of the 20th century and laid the foundations of the modern neo-liberal world order. As Lewis and Wigen noted “if China emerged as the hegemon of the modern world system, our meta-geographical concepts would surely reflect Sinocentrism” (Lewis and Wigen, 1997, p.10).

Nonetheless, most scholars reject the definition of regionalism modelled on the legalism, institutions and the acceptance of the superiority of EU-type of regionalism. In fact, there are two standpoints toward European integration theory, both hampering the development of genuine comparative regionalism. One is about the elevation of the European integration theory to the level of comparative research, while the other is sceptical towards the utility of such an approach. Especially, realist/intergovernmental and liberal/institutional scholarships were concerned with explicating the differences between the “standard” European case and the looser integration processes in Asia and Africa.

Another major intellectual contribution to the study of regionalism came with the advent of constructivism, the tenets of which often overlapped with those of new-regionalism (Acharya, 2012, p. 9). Constructivism explained regionalism out of the rationalist/materialist prism of neo-functionalism and neoliberalism. Constructivists believe that regional and national identities can co-exist and complement each other rather than being mutually exclusive (Acharya, 2012, pp. 9-10). Currently, the trends of studying regionalism shifted from Eurocentrism to Euro-exceptionalism, especially with the emergence of a plethora of regional groupings in different parts of the world (ASEAN, African Union, APEC, ASEM, ASEAN Plus Three, etc.)

The Methodological Problem

Methods in social sciences are divided into two major clusters: idiographic and nomothetic. The former usually implies qualitative research design and is about focusing on the particular aspects of the studied object, while the latter, is mostly about the discovery of general scientific laws. In the study of regionalism, nomothetic methods are mostly used to study the comparative aspects of regional trade agreements. Moreover, the positivist-reflectivist

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debate did not eschew the study of regionalism.

The proponents of the positivist paradigm namely realists and liberalists are mostly concerned with methodological prowess. They do believe that akin to the natural world, the social world is also governed by regularities that can be explained by the relevant theories thus rejecting the interpretive and subjective approach intrinsic to reflectivism. On the other hand, constructivists, who belong to the reflectivist paradigm, (recently allied with post-modernists, feminists, etc.), reject positivist convictions about the utmost importance of observability. They note that not all the variables are possible to take into consideration (Benneyworth, 2018). On top of that, considering the EU *assui generis* renders the so-called “n=1 problem”. The single case clearly does not leave much room for developing a robust theory thus further hindering any interaction between EU studies and regionalism.

In other words, there is a mismatch between specialisation on a specific region and the comparative regionalism. On the other hand, it is believed that EU has more differences than commonalities with the other regional formations. Therefore, it is difficult to justify whether the comparisons of the EU with the other regional formations has any added value or it's more like the comparison between apples and oranges. The solution of the problem is to compare the EU where and as much as it is possible and makes sense (de Lombaerde et al, 2010, p. 744). For example, it does make sense to compare EU with other regional projects like the South African Development Community (SADC) than with the USA when it comes to the relationship between regional rule-making and national constitutional courts. However, in the area of global trade and competition policies, it is more expedient to compare the EU with the USA.

Apart from the aforesaid **major** problems, one can also identify (relatively) **minor** problems to the study of regionalism (the categorizations is mine). In particular, five features that lower down the value of studies are the following ones: 1. Dominating Eurocentrism or **EU**rocentrism, 2. almost exclusive reference to English language literature, 3. Domination of and acknowledging to the relatively small number of scholars, 4. The studies revolve around only three sub-disciplines (IR, international political economy and area studies), 5. insufficient discussion of the scientific foundations of the field (Closa, 2015, p. 1). Though English became a lingua franca, not all scholars have sufficient command to access the English-language literature, let alone having their own work contributing to the body of literature. As for the lack of disciplines involved, it is worth mentioning that economists, for instance, mostly pay attention to the trade and economic factors such as economic flows, free movement of goods, services, capital, etc.

Economist Jagdish Bhagwati, for instance, defined regionalism as “preferential trade agreements among the subset of nations” (Bhagwati, 1993, p. 22). Such purely economic definitions reduce regionalism to trade promotion policies. In the meanwhile, although for the lawyers the distinction between national and international law is quite clear, the boundaries sometimes become quite porous. Furthermore, the principles of the EU law (supremacy, direct effect, and direct applicability) make it closer to the federal law (Bhagwati, 1993, p. 22). All those hurdles pave a way for questioning the scientific foundations of the field. For instance, it is yet unclear whether regionalism is a separate branch or IR, interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary. Nevertheless, it should be stated that some of the minor problems, such as the problem caused by the dominance of the lingua franca (English) for example, are not idiosyncratic only to the study of regionalism, but are covariant, i.e. reflected in the other areas of study within the IR orbit.

Conclusion

To conclude, regionalism is a weak emerging paradigm based on conceptual pluralism, theoretical eclecticism and methodological imperfection. In addition, the fairly increased interest in the study of regionalism and its conceptual, theoretical and methodological problems pose a serious challenge to this relatively new field. The conceptual problems are probably the most difficult to tackle, since the boundaries among all the said concepts are extremely porous and the semantics of the concepts overlap quite often. The analysis above showed that there are a few fuzzy overlapping terms that need clear and concise definition lest the studies of regionalism become too wordy and overcomplicated. On top of that, the academic literature is still dominated by dissensus and Eurocentrism. As Hurrell noted: “theories of regionalism turn out to be a little more than a translation of European experience into a more abstract theoretical language” (Hurrell, 2005, p. 39). The possible way out can be by focusing only on those aspects of the European integration theory that are comparable with those of the other regions. Last but not least, a few well-

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entrenched traditions in social science identified above as “relatively minor” further complicate the overall jigsaw.

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