

Comparative Regionalism's Decolonial Turn: A Proposition

Written by Densua Mumford

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DENSUA MUMFORD, OCT 3 2020

Comparative regionalism as a subfield of International Relations (IR) has great potential to realise a decolonial agenda. It is no accident that Amitav Acharya, trying to reconceptualise the wider discipline, believed a world of regions to be a helpful starting point for creating a truly decentred, 'Global' IR (Acharya, 2014). By conceiving of the world as a composite of multiple regions, we open up the possibility of conceiving of multiple histories, multiple civilisations, and multiple knowledges that may all be worthy of informing our scholarly endeavours.

However, a regionalist conception of IR also harbours the equally great danger of operating like a placebo instead of a panacea. As Arturo Escobar argues, 'what is at stake is the process by which, in the history of the modern West, non-European areas have been systematically organized into, and transformed according to, European constructs. Representations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America as Third World and underdeveloped are the heirs of an illustrious genealogy of Western conceptions about those parts of the world' (Escobar, 2012: 43). Like the field of international development that Escobar critiques, mainstream comparative regionalism has thus far functioned as a conduit for European constructs of the Other (Börzel and Risse, 2016, 2019, 2020). It should instead challenge that genealogy and become a space in which African constructs, Asian constructs, and Latin American constructs, amongst many others, co-determine the mainstream scholarly debate about world politics.

While comparative regionalism assumes a world of regions, it has imported from the wider IR discipline the same problems of racism, Eurocentrism, and coloniality, the latter being 'long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations' (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 243; for decolonial critiques of IR generally see Sabaratnam, 2011; Tucker, 2018; Hobson, 2007).

Instead of making the rich plurality of regions the starting point for investigation, the subfield subscribes to the logic of seeking a universal theory that homogenises all experience. In the process, comparative regionalism has uniformly constructed diverse regional experiences using concepts such as 'security communities' and 'diffusion' (Adler and Barnett, 1996; Buzan, 2012; Jetschke and Lenz, 2013a; Lenz and Burilkov, 2017), which have inevitably elevated Europe to the top of a normative hierarchy; masked the fact that Europe was shaped as much by others as it did any shaping; represented Europe as an endogenously self-actualising and cohesive entity that spreads the good life to others; and denied the value of various forms of knowledge originating in other regions (see Shih and Hwang, 2018). To reiterate, these are not characteristics *only* of comparative regionalism, but characteristics of the wider discipline that comparative regionalism has uncritically adopted. In the following, I will argue for a different starting point for this subfield, one that takes the plurality of meaning-making, lived experiences, and histories of various regions as valid sources for theorising.

In each of the three sections below, I review problematic aspects of the subfield in line with decolonial critiques, and subsequently offer specific actionable strategies to address them. This brief text cannot represent an exhaustive list of actions, given the wide-ranging and continuing nature of the debate, nor can adoption of the recommendations here constitute sufficient action. Nevertheless, I believe the three points raised address fundamental characteristics of how comparative regionalism operates and are therefore worthy of discussion. One aim is to explicitly foster

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dialogue between decolonial thought and comparative regionalism as part of the greater effort to globalise IR. An equally important aim is to stimulate debate about what it means to develop a comparative regionalism that is not harmful or unjust (through erasure, hierarchisation, and marginalisation) to the histories, lived experiences, and epistemes of the diverse peoples it serves.

Avoid Universalisms and Embrace Intersubjective Meanings

A concern for decolonial scholarship is the endeavour in mainstream Western disciplines to build universal knowledge – an ambition rooted in a) the realist ontology of an objective reality with an essential universal logic and b) the Enlightenment faith in reason as a universal guide to truth. In IR, this manifests in the drive to produce generalisable theories that come as close as possible to capturing that singular reality. When Kenneth Waltz' neorealism emerged, it was valued for its parsimonious and highly generalisable propositions about conceptually vacuous, decontextualised states existing in an ahistorical and endless struggle for survival (Waltz, 2010). Stripped of any knowledge of history, culture, and identity, IR had supposedly become more 'scientific'. However, IR's brazen universalism has rarely led to useful knowledge for the majority of diverse communities in the world. Waltzian theory has not brought us any further in grappling with the destructive forces of war; war has merely changed in nature while continuing to confound us. Mainstream IR's key achievement has arguably been to repackage parochial West European and North American worldviews as universal knowledge (Bilgin, 2017; Grosfoguel, 2011).

Similarly, comparative regionalism strives for generalisable theories of regionalism. Comparisons of different regional efforts are justified in light of the universal logics that must underlie their apparent plurality. Particularities are thus treated as 'noise' or 'error'; differences are ignored as statistically insignificant. Comparative regionalism tells its own version of the Europe-created-the-world story by emphasising the diffusion of European norms and institutional forms to other regional organisations (Jetschke and Lenz, 2013b). While the phenomenon of diffusion is not necessarily treated as unproblematic by scholars, the focus on European diffusion per se allows scholars to marginalise the even greater questions of different agencies and differentiated experiences. Thus, a question about Southeast Asian regionalism becomes a hunt for explanations rooted in European agency (Jetschke and Murray, 2012). In focusing on similarities derived from the supposed European model, this approach denies the possibility of other regions being valid starting points for building theory about their and other regional dynamics.

Instead of universal theories, comparative regionalism should aim to uncover and understand the various intersubjective meanings that drive and shape the behaviour of actors involved in regionalism (for examples see Acharya, 1997; Closa and Palestini, 2018; Glas and Balogun, 2020; Khadiagala, 2010, 2013; Khadiagala and Lyons, 2001; Mazrui, 1967; Ng, forthcoming; Tiekou, 2012, 2019). Comparative regionalism should begin with the question of how actors within regions make sense of their own actions and their world. How do they justify their behaviours? Which shared ideas, if any, matter to them? And how do they perceive their role in relation to the region, and their region's role in relation to the global? The results from different regions may overlap in some ways and diverge in others, and they should of course not be assumed to be fully independent – fully endogenous regions are a myth. However, by starting with the particularities of meaning-making in various regions, comparative regionalism will take seriously the lived experiences and agencies of the peoples that actually shape their region.

Ask Research Questions That Emerge from the Concerns of the Communities in Those Regions

Decolonial scholars have elaborated on Robert Cox's observation that, 'Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose' (Cox, 1981: 128, emphasis in original). Similarly, knowledge as a whole is always developed for someone and for some particular purpose. As a modern discipline emerging out of the Western superpowers' concerns with managing race relations and empire, mainstream IR has naturalised some problems such as war, development, and global governance, and created silences around others such as race, colonialism, and justice (Vitalis, 2015).

In comparative regionalism thus far, distinctly European fears have served as sources of research questions. An important recent example is the trend of research on 'legitimacy'. The trend stems from the EU's decades-long experience of a legitimacy crisis due to its democratic deficit, resulting in the high-profile exit of the United Kingdom. While EU scholars have accurately recognised this as a societal problem that requires social scientific investigation,

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their colleagues in comparative regionalism have further deduced that legitimacy must play as prominent a role in the experiences of regional organisations elsewhere (Dingwerth et al., 2019; Lenz et al., 2019; Rocabert et al., 2019). Furthermore, legitimacy is presumed to mean 'democratic' legitimacy, while the multitude of other expressions of legitimacy emerging from the infinite varieties of norms and identities in the world are simply left untheorised. For the societies in many regions, issues other than legitimacy may be more salient but remain invisible to comparative regionalist scholars. For African regional organisations such as the African Union, ECOWAS, and SADC, lack of funding has been a perennial burden, as has been the question of member state commitment to implementation of regional decisions. But these have less to do with the legitimacy of the organisations, and much more to do with the significance of financial resources in the politics of the region and the particular concerns of African ruling regimes.

In asking European questions about the AU, Mercosur, the Arab League, and others, comparative regionalism centres Europe as the subject. On the one hand, it reinforces IR's habit of asserting that only the problems of hegemonic states, empires, and elite transnational communities (high politics) are valid for investigation while the problems of other communities (low politics) are not: thus, the problems of the EU remain paramount. On the other hand, it helps to craft a narrative of homogenous problems, where diverse regional organisations suffer the same maladies and therefore require the same uniform remedies prescribed by the hegemonic centre: that is, anyone can learn from the EU's experience. At worst, comparative regionalism risks constructing the various regions as problems in themselves (i.e. failing integration efforts, poor mimics, layers of 'decoupled' institutions) that require solutions through the intervention of European counterparts.

Decentring Europe in comparative regionalism means engaging with the perspectives of regional communities and asking research questions arising from problems as *they* conceive of them. Implied is an active, continuous, and respectful engagement between regional communities and scholars of comparative regionalism. Methodologically, it may mean locating research within the communities most relevant to the construction of regional identities, regional organisations, etc. Much inductive and abductive, theory-generating work will be needed to identify issues that matter to regional communities and the questions they ask themselves in their continuing quest to make sense of their lives. Some scholarship has already moved in this direction, for example, Antonia Witt's research on how local African communities experience the interventions of African regional organisations (Witt, 2019; Witt and Schnabel, 2020).

Engage with (Scholarly) Conceptual Debates Occurring in Relevant Regions When Theorising

Decolonial scholarship acknowledges that global power relations also shape academic knowledge production (Melber, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019). One representation of this is the International Studies Association's (ISA) establishment of regional hubs, which reifies the 21st century global hierarchy of an American centre with subordinate regional offshoots. This also holds true for comparative regionalism. Theory is assumed to emanate from Western Europe and North America, while other regions at best act as data excavation sites. The reproduction of West European and North American epistemic hegemony is fostered by the dominance of journals located in those centres. In comparative regionalism, scholars strive to publish in *The Journal of Common Market Studies*, the *European Journal of International Relations*, in *International Organization*, in the *American Political Science Review*, in *International Theory*, in the *Review of International Organizations*, the *Review of International Studies*, and in *International Studies Quarterly*. Since scholars from most regions rarely publish in those journals (Briggs and Weathers, 2016; Maliniak et al., 2018), comparative regionalism has remained a narrow, hegemonic dialogue centred in Western Europe and North America.

Instead, the subfield should aim for a decentred exchange of ideas in which conceptualisation and theorising are connected to the scholarly debates of regional communities (Odoom and Andrews, 2017). This is because scholarly conceptual debates reflect the meaning-making of the societies of which they are part. Comparative regionalism currently reflects the ways in which primarily European scholars are making sense of diverse regionalisms using the meanings of their particular European societies. As an example, we may consider the concept of 'regionalism' itself. What regionalism means to the peoples of Africa is something quite different to what regionalism means to the peoples of Latin America, though, of course, there may be a family resemblance in their understandings. Such meanings are likely to have changed over time, from pre-colonial to contemporary eras (Bilgin, 2019).

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'Regionalism' may also be entirely absent in the meaning-making of some communities, which may explain the absence of its institutional forms in parts of the world. Yet, theorising in comparative regionalism has not sufficiently integrated these different meanings or accounted for them, ensuring that the theories that arise from the scholarship have no connection to the lived experiences of regional communities. A symptom of coloniality is forcing diverse lived experiences into a singular frame of understanding instead of allowing those lived experiences to produce their own useful framings (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015, 2018). When the meaning of 'regionalism' is opened up, it becomes possible to imagine a variety of regionalisms (as well as legitimate absences of regionalism), each with a particular purpose, each with a particular historical rootedness, and each developing in mutual engagement with other regionalisms (Mumford, forthcoming).

In research design and in the publication process, scholars of comparative regionalism should engage rigorously with the conceptual debates occurring in the regions of interest. This would require building the language skills to access the texts and oral histories of particular regions, engaging with scholarship published by non-hegemonic journals and publishing houses, and engaging with networks of scholars and practitioners in locally organised conferences. Importantly, dialogue should also flow freely and directly across various regions, and not just via mediation or translation by European scholarship: African scholars of regionalism should directly connect with Latin American and Asian scholars of regionalism as much as with any others. As a result, comparative regionalism might evolve from being a field of colonial constructs to becoming a field of pluralistic dialogue.

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About the author:

Dr Densua Mumford is Assistant Professor of International Relations at the Faculty of Governance and Global

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Affairs, Leiden University. She completed her DPhil in International Relations at the University of Oxford. Previously, she completed a Bachelor in Politics at the University of Nottingham, UK, and a Master in International Relations jointly awarded by the University of Bremen and Jacobs University Bremen, Germany. Her research explores the international relations and foreign policies of African states. Within this general theme, she focuses on the role of regional organisations such as the African Union, ECOWAS, SADC, and the EAC in the political and economic dynamics of the continent. More broadly, her interests include Global IR, decolonial IR, and theories of international relations.