

## Regionalism

Regionalism refers to the political and cognitive idea of forming regions. It is usually associated with a formal programme, and since the mid-1980s there has been an explosion of such regional programmes on a global scale. The broadening and deepening of the European Union (EU) is perhaps the most obvious example, but regionalism is also evident in the revitalization or expansion of many other regional projects around the world, such as the African Union (AU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) and, more recently, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR).

Today's regionalism is closely linked with the shifting nature of global politics and the intensification of globalization. Regionalism is characterized by the involvement of almost all governments in the world, but it also involves a wide variety of non-state actors. This results in a multitude of formal and informal regional types of governance and regional networks in most fields of politics. This pluralism and multidimensionality of contemporary regionalism gives rise to a number of new puzzles and challenges in today's politics.

This entry will, firstly, define the terms regions, regionalism and regionalization. Secondly, it will provide an overview of the continuities and discontinuities between the early and the more recent debates on regionalism. Finally, it presents a brief discussion of regionalism and world order.

## **Regions, Regionalism and Regionalization**

The concept of region evolved historically to mean a space between the national and the local within a particular state. This meaning may be captured by the term micro-region, or sub-national region. The concept of region may, however, also be used to refer to macro-regions (so-called world or international regions), which are larger territorial units, as opposed to non-territorial units or sub-systems. They exist between the state level and the global system level. The macro-region has been the most common object of analysis in International Relations, while micro-regions have more commonly been considered in the study of domestic politics.

A conventional definition of a macro-region, originally coined by Joseph Nye, is a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence. Historically, a plethora of opinions has been advanced regarding which mutual interdependencies matter most: economic, political and social interrelationships or historical, cultural and ethnic bonds. It has been argued that the definitions of what constitutes a region may vary according to the particular issue under investigation. This may lead to the identification of overlapping types of regions, such as economic regions, security regions, environmental regions and cultural regions.

The overwhelming majority of studies in the field of Political Science and International Relations has focussed on pre-defined regions in the form of state-led and inter-state regional organizations and frameworks. Examples include AU, ASEAN, EU, SADC, ECOWAS. The argument that the composition of regions should not be assumed or limited to regional intergovernmental organizations has been stressed in recent constructivist and post-structuralist scholarship. From this perspective, all regions are deemed to be socially constructed and hence politically contested. Emphasis is placed upon how political actors perceive and interpret the idea of a region and notions of “regionness”. According to this school of thought, there are no “natural” regions; all regions are (at least potentially)

heterogeneous with unclear territorial margins. Focus is often placed on processes of region-building and regionalization, which implies that the distinction between regionalism and regionalization is emphasized.

“Regionalism” means the body of ideas, values and objectives that contribute to the creation, maintenance or modification of a particular region or type of world order. It is usually associated with a formal policy and project, and often leads to institution-building. Furthermore, regionalism ties agents to a specific project that is limited spatially or socially but not in time.

“Regionalization” refers to the process of region formation. It implies a focus on the process by which regions come into existence and are consolidated, their “becoming”, so to speak. In its most basic sense the term may imply no more than a concentration of goods, services, investment, peoples and ideas at the regional level. This interaction may lead to the emergence of regional actors, networks and organizations. When they are active at the regional level, regional actors bring about regionalization, so-called region-building. Regionalization may be caused by regionalism, but it may also emerge in the absence of a regionalist project and ideology. Hence, regionalism may not always have much practical significance for the reality of regionalization.

### **Early and Recent Debates on Regionalism**

Experts on the subject often distinguish between the “old” and the “new” regionalism, or what is more appropriately labelled the early and the more recent debate on regionalism. The early debate covers research undertaken between the 1950s and the 1970s, and the keyword was regional integration. These studies generally viewed regional integration as an endogenous process, that is, a development that arose from conditions internal to and specific to each

region in question. With some exceptions, particularly Latin America and Africa, most early research dealt with European integration, as there were few other regional experiments to theorize about at this time. The dominant approach was neo-functionalism, which mainly considered the “spill-over” from economic integration to political unification of Western Europe. Leading authors who wrote of such early regionalism included Ernst Haas and Karl Deutsch.

The 1970s was a period of “Eurosclerosis” within the European Community, but the 1985 White Paper on the internal market and the Single European Act resulted in a new dynamic process of European integration. This was also the start of what has often been referred to as the “new regionalism” on a global scale. To some observers regionalism was “new” mainly in the sense that it represented a revival of protectionism or neo-mercantilism. However, most observers highlighted the fact that the closure of regions was not on the agenda. Indeed, one of the characteristic features of the more recent debate on regionalism, especially within the field of International Relations, is its focus on the conditions related to globalization. The recent debate is to a large extent generated by the transformation of the Westphalian nation-state, the erosion of national borders and the urgent question of how to find an alternative post-Westphalian order in the context of globalization. Perhaps the richest literature in this regard is on the role of regionalism in the context of multilateral trade and security.

One prominent scholar of the recent debate, Björn Hettne, stresses that regionalism needs to be understood both from an exogenous perspective (outside-in) and an endogenous perspective (inside-out). The former perspective refers to the fact that regionalization and globalization are intertwined articulations of global transformation, whereas the latter implies that regionalization is shaped from within the region by a large number of different actors. The exogenous perspective has developed primarily in the course of the recent debate, whereas the endogenous perspective finds continuity with functionalist and neo-functionalist

theorizing about integration (of Europe), the role of agency and the long-term transformation of territorial identities. By contrast with the time at which Haas, Deutsch and the early regional integration scholars were writing, today's scholars identify many regionalisms and this provides a very different base for comparative studies of regionalism. It is apparent that neither the object of study (ontology) nor the way of studying it (epistemology) has remained static. One indication of this is the emergence of a variety of theoretical frameworks for the study of regionalism, such as constructivism, liberal institutionalism, regional security complex theory, governance approaches, new regionalism approach (NRA), region-building and regional network approaches. Indeed, current regionalization may be seen as a new political landscape in the making, characterized by an expanding cast of actors (state and non-state) operating in the regional arena and across several interrelated dimensions: security, development, trade, environment, identity and so on.

Historically the study of regionalism and regional integration has emphasized states as actors and focussed on sovereignty transfer or political unification within inter-state regional organizations. Since the late 1990s, research has placed greater emphasis on “soft”, de facto or informal regionalization, acknowledging the fact that a range of non-state actors has begun to operate at the regional level, within as well as beyond state-led institutional frameworks. For instance, business interests and multinationals are not only operative in the global sphere, but they also tend to create regionalized patterns of economic activity. Oft-cited examples include the regional production systems in East and Southeast Asia and South African business expansion in Southern Africa. Similarly, civil society is often neglected in the study of regionalism, despite the fact that its impact is increasing, as is evident in the transnational activist networks and processes of civil society interaction emerging at the regional level around the world.

The causal relationship between regionalism and regionalization (or formal and informal regionalism as it is sometimes called) has attracted considerable attention in the

recent debate. Key issues are whether or not formal regionalism precedes informal regionalization and the ways in which state, market, and civil society actors relate and come together in different formal and informal coalitions, networks and modes of regional and global governance. Consequently, the study of regionalism is inseparable from the study of globalization and world order.

### **Regionalism and World Order**

Many regionalists contend that regions have become critical to contemporary world politics. As Peter Katzenstein points out, “this view is in stark contrast to those who focus on the purportedly stubborn persistence of the nation-state or the inevitable march of globalization”. It is generally agreed that globalization challenges the Westphalian nation-state. However, political intervention or at least some form of governance is still needed. One way in which “the political” may return is as a reformed neo-Westphalian order (that is, building on the nation-state system), governed either by a reconstituted state-driven multilateral system, or by a more loosely organized global “concert” of the regional hegemons of the world, such as Germany, Japan, Brazil, South Africa.

Regionalism may also be part of a post-Westphalian governance model (that is, transcending the nation-state system) of coexisting regional communities. By comparison with economic and market-led globalization, regionalism is more anchored to territorial domains. By comparison with multilateralism, it is a more exclusive relationship based on conscious political strategies, potentially guided by world order values such as multiculturalism and interregional dialogue and cooperation.

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**See also:** Regional integration, Regionalization, European integration, International organizations, Security (regional)

### **Further Readings**

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