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The Evolution of Supranational Regionalism:
From Top-down Regulatory Governance to Sustainability Regions?



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Abstract

Supranational regionalism has been a definitive feature of world politics in the 20th century. Regional organizations have grown in numbers and roles, amid the general quest for economic integration and globalization. Yet, in the past few years, regional integration appears to have run out of steam, especially in the aftermath of the global economic crisis. The top-down model of governance and its trade-driven nature are increasingly contested in a phase of economic contraction. Against such a backdrop, this article analyzes the historical and conceptual evolution of regionalism in order to identify some of its key (albeit often 'hidden') characteristics. It then ventures into charting its potential future trajectory and concludes that a new type of 'deep' regionalism may very well replace economic globalization as the dominant world structure in the 21st century.

Key words: supranational regionalism; top-down governance; global economic contraction; sustainability

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Introduction

In a changing world, where continuous evolutions challenge traditional decision making and (nation) states find it increasingly difficult to govern political and economic processes that are ever more cross-boundary in nature, supranational regional governance has proven a powerful tool to address such as growing complexity. As a meso-level between the state and the international system, regions have been purposefully created to deal with phenomena and processes transcending the borders of national communities. Nowadays there is a virtually endless list of regional organizations operating in various sectors, entrusted with varying degrees of power and decision-making authority. Although most of them only perform specific functions (e.g. natural resources management, conflict prevention, customs control, financial stability, policing, etc.), there has been an increase in the establishment of 'general purpose' regional organizations, of which the European Union (EU) is the best-known and most developed example. Some of them have evolved out of specific trade agreements (e.g. free trade areas), such as the Common Market of the South (Mercosur), while others have been created with a view to guaranteeing security and development, such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the African Union (AU).

Back in 1945, Winston Churchill envisaged an international community made up of regional councils. This idea was echoed by scholars advocating regional coalitions to advance the interests of developing countries and by others who considered regional conflict resolution mechanisms to be the best way to maintain global order, the so-called 'peace in parts' (Kothari 1974; Nye 1971). Although this 'world of regions' has not materialized, it is ever more evident that regional governance has become an integral part of global governance mechanisms, often through explicit arrangements within leading international institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Katzenstein 2005; Fawcett 2013).

In parallel with the mushrooming of regional organizations, the study of regionalism has emerged. While until the 1980s, the concept was simply subsumed under the broader field of international relations (and, often, as a sub-category like economic interdependence), since the end of the Cold War a renewed focus on the role of regional organizations has given birth to a specific field of study, which highlights the increasing complexity of regional formations and their multi-level/multi-sectoral purposes (Fawcett 1995). A wealth of comparative analyses and in-depth case studies has thus shown the ambivalence, for instance, of concepts such as 'regional cooperation' and 'regional integration', traditionally considered as elements of a continuum process of economic regionalization (Schulz, Soderbaum and Ojendal 2001). While regional cooperation is nowadays broadly employed to describe the numerous cases of structured collaboration among governments in a given geographical area, regional integration describes specifically (adds some more rhythm to the sentence) the process of supranationalization of authority in a given policy field, which requires some degree of shared sovereignty (Langenhove 2013).

More recently, a 'new' regionalism approach has produced important insights into the study of regional politics by emphasizing the peculiarities of regionalism beyond the traditional European context (Warleigh-Lack, Robinson and Rosamond 2011). For many years the debate on regionalism was monopolised by European scholars, a situation which produced theories that were unable to 'travel well' and provoked perennial claims

of European 'exceptionalism' (Acharya 2012). More recently several attempts have been made at comparing regionalism across regions in order to highlight mutual learning processes and specific trends (Katzenstein 1996; Langenhove 2012). Most scholars of regionalism today would agree that regionalism is not the exclusive domain of states but also encompasses interactions among non-state actors, as well as between states and non-state actors within a given policy area (Shaw, Grant and Cornelissen 2012; Fioramonti 2013b). Moreover, it is generally understood that regionalism is somewhat broader than regionalization, as the latter simply describes the intensity of economic interdependence (Hettne 2005). Indeed, regionalism indicates a multi-level process, where social and cultural processes can precede, replace or strengthen economic integration. There is also an increasing recognition, by and large prompted by the application of constructivism to the study of regionalism, that regions are not geographically 'given' but are rather socially constructed through human interactions, political discourse and cultural evolutions (Langenhove 2011). This has emphasized the role of domestic and transnational factors, which are important determinants in the emergence and development of regional institutions, and has increasingly contributed to the understanding of regionalism as a political process (Fioramonti 2012a; Fioramonti 2012b).

As noted by Louise Fawcett, the concept of regionalism has had "a complex history because of its essentially contested and flexible nature" (2013: 5). Against such a backdrop, this article analyzes the historical and conceptual evolution of regionalism in order to identify some of its key (albeit often 'hidden') characters. It then ventures into charting its potential future trajectory in the 21st century. The next section looks at the early history of regionalism, focusing on some of its prototypical manifestations before discussing the key facets of postwar regionalism in the 20th century, particularly its technocratic top-down character and its intimate link with neoliberal globalization. Subsequently, the article analyzes the evolution of regionalism in a world in crisis, concentrating on how regional politics has been affected by the post-2008 global economic crisis, with the accompanying calls for greater accountability. Finally, the analysis concludes with some general observations about the future of regionalism in a world in contraction, arguing that a new type of 'deep' regionalism may very well replace economic globalization as the dominant defining feature of world politics in the 21st century.

A short history of regionalism: from classical prototypes to technocratic governance

The Latin root of the word 'region' is *rego*, which means to 'lead' or 'rule.' In ancient Roman governance, the region was a portion of territory under a specific political authority. It was an administrative unit of the republic and, later on, it became a province of the empire: an area characterized by common institutions, rules and power structures (Nicolet 1991). In contemporary political analysis, the term region has become a conceptual 'hatstand', straddling disciplines and terrains. As Luk van Langenhove notes, a region can refer to "a geographical space, economic interaction, institutional or governmental jurisdiction, or social or cultural characteristics" (Langenhove 2003: 4). For Richard Hartshorne, who approached the theme from a geographer's perspective, "a 'region' is an area of specific location which is in some way distinctive from other areas and which extends as far as that distinction extends" (Hartshorne 1959: 130). For

others, the region is a “rubbery concept”, stretching above and below the administrative boundaries of states (Hooghe, Marks and Schakel 2010: 4). As such, regions are not predefined: they are subject to change over time, in line with the prevailing political, economic and social discourse taking place in each society (Acharya 2009). Andrew Hurrell reminds us that there are no ‘natural’ regions: definitions of region and indicators of ‘regionness’ vary according to the particular problem or question under investigation (Hurrell 1995: 334).

The broad term ‘regionalism’ has been used in the literature to cover a variety of distinct phenomena, including the global ramifications of regionalization processes, regional awareness and identity, regional interstate cooperation, state-promoted regional economic integration and regional cohesion (Hurrell 1995; Fawcett and Hurrell 1995). As a political project, regionalism is by no means a modern phenomenon: in fact, it cuts through various epochs of human history as forms of cooperation across political borders largely pre-date the establishment of modern states and the very concept of the nation. One may say that the pre-history of regionalism begins in the ancient Greek peninsula, when the sovereign and independent city-states (*poleis*) integrated to form a relatively homogenous economic, political, military and cultural region (Larsen 1944). Interestingly, such a community had both offensive ambitions (as exemplified by the military campaign against Troy narrated by Homer in his Iliad) and defensive elements (manifest in the unification of the city states against the Persian invasion during the Greco-Persian Wars of 459-449 BC). The League of Corinth (also known as Hellenic League) was a regional federation of states created by Philip of Macedon, which for the first time united all Greek city-states (with the exception of Sparta) under one political authority.

More than a thousand years later, the Hanseatic League established in the 12th century represented a formidable example of a regional, economic and commercial confederation stretching from the Baltic to the North Sea. Its aim was to protect and promote the common commercial interests of its member polities, guarantee reciprocal economic aid and build a common market along the key routes of Northern European trade (Winter 1948). The United Provinces that gave birth to the Union of Utrecht to resist the power of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and his son Philip II of Spain also exhibited the very characteristics of economic, political, military cooperation and interdependence defining regionalism (Boogman 1980). Similar phenomena of economic and political interdependence across sovereign polities in the pre-modern era can be found in most continents of the world; the (Western) examples mentioned above are by no means exhaustive of the variety of ancient forms of regionalism. For instance, in pre-Columbian America (15th century AD), the Iroquois League (also known as the League of Peace and Power) united the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Sayuka and Seneca nations under one common political authority and only dissolved after the American War of Independence in the 18th century. Some argue that the League’s institutional setup provided an important framework for the US constitution and the conceptual tradition of American federalism (Tooker 1988).

With the establishment of the Westphalian state, most of these classical forms of regionalism disappeared or were integrated into the newly established polities (the Union of Utrecht, for example, was incorporated into the Republic of the Seven United Provinces through the Peace of Westphalia of 1648). Modern regionalism was, by and large, characterized by force and coercion. As modern states fought over borders and

annexed new territories, they indirectly generated regionalism. For example, even though Napoleon aimed to build an empire (which by definition should have no clear geographical delimitation), he only succeeded at uniting a 'region', stretching from Spain to the Balkans. Modern forms of nation building were also, *ceteris paribus*, forms of regionalism. The United States was born as a federation of independent former colonies. Both Germany and Italy established themselves as unitary states through both the voluntary annexation of autonomous polities and military conquest. In Germany, the Zollverein was launched in 1818 as a customs union to support the creation of a common market across German states and reduce the influence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the region (Mattli 1999). As a form of economic integration, it was a powerful vehicle for Prussia to achieve political unification and establish the German Reich in 1871.

Trans-frontier natural resources were among the first types of common goods to be placed under the administration of regional organizations. For instance, the oldest still-existing regional organization in the world is the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine, an authority established in Europe during the 1815 Congress of Vienna. Its purpose was to manage cross-boundary transport along the river Rhine, which cuts across France, Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands. In spite of its limited political clout it set an important precedent for the future trajectory of European integration (Collinson 1972).

Across the Atlantic, South American states were early advocates of regionalism after gaining independence in the 19th century. The Bolivarian revolutions were animated by ideals of pan-Americanism and the creation of Gran Colombia in 1819, a state comprising present-day Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama, parts of Peru and Guyana as well as western Brazil, profoundly influenced the spirit of regionalism in the sub-continent despite its short lifespan (Gran Colombia ceased to exist in 1831) (Fawcett 2005). Similarly, the tradition of pan-Arabism dating back to Ottoman domination and cutting through European colonial rule provided the cultural underpinnings for the institutionalization of regional organizations in the Arab world, notably the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council (Barnett 1998).

In Africa too, cultural and institutional experimentations with regionalism can be traced back to the early 1900s. The Southern African Customs Union, for instance, was established in 1910 as the world's first regional organization to regulate common customs control. It included the then Union of South Africa and the High Commission territories of Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland (currently South Africa, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland). Early conceptualizations of Africa as 'one' region were deeply influenced by pan-Africanism, an ideology aimed at uniting all black people (including African Americans and Africans in the Caribbean) on a racial basis, as espoused in the intellectual work of the Jamaican politician and journalist Marcus Garvey. For some, pan-Africanism became the essential glue in the "unification of African forces against imperialism and colonial domination, recognized as an essential component of strategies of economic decolonisation long before the attainment of political independence" (Asante 1997: 32). These ideals strongly influenced post-colonial African liberators, including the first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, who was among the early champions of the idea of a United States of Africa (Olivier 2010; Zank 2012).

There is no doubt, however, that the end of the Second World War marked a watershed between the early prototypical and *ad hoc* experiences of regionalism and the mature

forms of regional governance that have marked the 20th century. This constituted, however, an apparent paradox. Indeed, the early architects of the postwar global institutional order favoured a 'universal' over a regional approach to global governance (Schreuer 1995). They had experienced the affirmation of aggressive forms of regional dominance, particularly the respectively pan-European and pan-Asian expansionist projects of Germany and Japan in the 1930s, a repeat of which could only be avoided through the establishment of strong international institutions upholding universal values (Fawcett 2013). At the same time, however, the international community was beginning to separate into the Cold War blocs, which encouraged both West and East to conduct their economic and security affairs on a regional basis, while focusing on the international arena for high-politics affairs.

Ever since, the term regionalism has come to indicate supranational forms of integration (or cooperation) aiming to establish economic, political, judicial and monetary interdependence among neighbouring sovereign states (Hettne 2005). In the past few decades, as states have intensified their mutual interdependence (a process which is generally referred to as globalization), the phenomenon of regionalism has been reinterpreted through the lens of regional integration, the study of which has become a fully-fledged field of research in international relations and political science (Langenhove 2013).

But what exactly is regional integration? Ernst Haas's oft-cited definition goes as follows:

integration is the process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities to a new centre, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over pre-existing national states. The end result is a new political community, superimposed over the pre-existing ones (Haas 1958: 16).

In other words, regional integration is the process of transferring loyalty, expectations and decision-making power to a new, regional centre. By contrast, Karl Deutsch defined regional integration not as a process but as a state of affairs: "a relationship among units in which they are mutually interdependent and jointly produce system properties which they would separately lack" (Deutsch 1968, 192).

Because of its geographical coherence and linear evolution, the process of integration in postwar Europe has become the text-book reference point for most contemporary theories of regionalism, broadly shaping the vocabulary and conceptual structures of the sub-field. By largely focusing on the EU, regional integration theories have sought to explain why and how Europe has been successful in its integration efforts, thus attempting to identify models that could then be applied elsewhere in the world. The early theoretical formulations of regional economic integration were introduced in the 1950s-1960s by political economists, in particularly Jacob Viner and Bela Balassa, who saw integration as a gradual process of economic cooperation following an inherent linearity toward more advanced stages of inclusiveness and ultimately unity (Viner 1950; Balassa 1961). From their perspective, five steps encapsulate the process of integration: the establishment of, first, a free trade area (aimed at generating economies of scale), leading then to a customs union established on the basis of a common external tariff, evolving next into a common market, further graduating into an economic union and ultimately developing into a political union (Balassa 1961). By and large, the EU followed

such a step-by-step model of linear integration, through its pursuit of progressive market integration before gradual political integration, including in the 'high politics' domains.

Political scientists and international relations scholars have also produced their fair share of regional integration models. The best-known theory to explain the 'fast track' mode of integration is federalism, while the most influential approaches to understanding the organic integration processes are neo-functionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism. In the federalist camp, William Riker argued that a 'federal bargain' underlies the willingness of policy makers to give up national sovereignty (Riker 1964). Riker isolates two circumstances that can incentivize statesmen to join together in a federal bargain: prospects for economic expansion or an external (often military) threat. To a certain extent, we find a similar reasoning in Deutsch's concept of the 'security community', whereby regional cooperation/integration are modeled around the need to defend relatively smaller or weaker countries against a potential menace (Deutsch 1968). Similarly, Buzan (though from a neo-realist perspective) has attempted to describe the process of regional integration as a 'security complex model', whereby relatively small states coalesce to strengthen their collective bargaining power and comparative advantage (Buzan 1989). It is quite evident that the purely realist conception of threat as 'military' by definition may be very well expanded to also include economic and societal threats (McKay 1999; McKay 2001).

While federalism aims to explain why regions are formed, the 'organic' or step-by-step creation of a supranational entity is the focus of neo-functionalism. In essence, neo-functionalism emphasises the mechanisms of technocratic decision-making, incremental change and institutional learning as key characteristics of region-building. It also attaches considerable importance to the autonomous influence of supranational institutions and the emerging role of organized interests. As a theory, it was first formulated in the late 1950s and early 1960s, mainly through the work of Ernst Haas and Leon Lindberg (Haas 1958; Lindberg 1963). In Haas' reading of regional integration, states are driven to establish supranational institutions because the latter are better suited to perform specific tasks, increase information and reduce transaction costs (Haas 1958). The activity of supranational (mostly, technocratic) institutions in fields of 'low politics' thus generates 'spill-overs' into other governance fields, ultimately driving integration forward. It is interesting to note that neo-functionalism was also applied to the case of regional integration in Latin America, but only received general acceptance as a key theory when applied to European integration (Haas and Schmitter 1964).

For intergovernmentalists, regional integration should be seen as the result of bargains struck among nation states rather than the natural functional expansion of institutional prerogatives. Contrary to what neo-functionalists believe, specific geopolitical interests militate against a pooling of sovereignty in some areas of 'high politics', which ultimately means that national governments retain ultimate control over the process of regionalization and its decision-making authority (Hoffmann 1964; Hoffmann 1966). In its liberal version, intergovernmentalism recognizes the capacity of supranational institutions to enhance the capacity of national governments to develop policies of mutual interest (Moravcsik 1993). In this vein, regional integration can be best understood as a series of rational choices made by national leaders within a specific institutional setting. These choices respond to constraints and opportunities stemming from the economic interests of powerful domestic constituents, the relative power of states in a situation of asymmetrical interdependence, and the role of institutions in

bolstering the credibility of interstate commitments. Whether more focused on agency (e.g. federalism and intergovernmentalism) or more concerned with institutional structures (e.g. neo-functionalism), these theoretical approaches understand regionalism as an eminently top-down process, dominated by technocratic and political elites.

Regionalism in crisis? Paradigm shifts and bottom-up pressures

Since the end of the Cold War, neoliberal globalization (especially its focus on trade liberalization) has been a fundamental driving force behind the explosion of regionalism as a global phenomenon. This is the period when the European Communities merged into the current EU through the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. With the new treaty, Europe became a fully-fledged international actor, with foreign policy capacities and the ambition to stimulate similar regionalization processes in other areas of the world (Bretherton and Vogler 1996). The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, known as the Barcelona Process, was launched in 1995 to bring countries on the European, Asian and African shores of the Mediterranean closer together. These are also the years when leading regional organizations such as Mercosur (1991) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (1994) in the Americas, as well as the Southern African Development Community (1991) and the AU (2002) in Africa were created, the latter two being the outcome of a general overhaul of pre-existing and largely dormant institutions such as the Southern African Development Coordination Conference and the Organization for African Unity. These are the years when ASEAN experienced its fastest and deepest period of integration, with three consecutive enlargements, the establishment of links with China, Japan and South Korea through ASEAN+3 and the creation of monetary and financial coordination through the Chiang Mai Initiative. In 2007/2008, the process of regional expansion culminated with the establishment of an interregional strategic partnership between the EU and the AU and the creation of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), which united members of Mercosur and the Andean Community under a single institutional roof. This flurry of regional integration has led to a profusion of negotiations aimed at the establishment of interregional free trade areas between South America, Africa and Europe.

International institutions also reinforced the view that regional governance was an important pillar in the structuring of the neoliberal global order. In the early 1990s, former UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali spoke of regionalism as a 'healthy complement' to internationalism and, with his successor Kofi Annan, he convened the first of a series of meetings with the heads of the most prominent regional organizations in the world (Fawcett 2013). In the field of global trade, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and later the WTO, whose rules embodied the spirit of a multilateral trading system, included a specific provision for regional trade arrangements in Article XXIV and subsequent amendments, which has, ever since the mid-1990s (although Article XXIV dates back to 1947), allowed for the development of regional trade formations and interregional trade. (Article XXIV GATT has arguably allowed for the development of RTAs rather than strengthened them).

In such a framework, economic interdependence (more than political unity) is the fundamental character of regionalism and regional integration. The very definition of a region, for instance, can be understood in terms of interdependence. Arguably the best-known definition of a supranational region is that proposed by Joseph Nye, who defined it

as “a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence” (Nye 1965: vii). Although such a definition satisfies most conventional approaches to the study of regionalism, its focus on territorial continuity and state-centric action is often considered reductive by some scholars, who point out that regionalism has grown more and more nuanced in recent times, with important roles also played by non-state actors (such as corporations, transnational civil society, etc.) (Soderbaum and Shaw 2003). Moreover, from a reflectivist perspective, regions can also be seen as ‘constructs’, that is, outcomes of discursive interactions at the political, economic and social level rather than given geographical areas (Langenhove 2012). As such, regions are not predefined by physical conditions, but are continuously reinvented, in line with the prevailing political, economic and social discourse in each society (Acharya 2009). Some of these differences constitute the most significant disagreements between proponents of traditional regional integration theory (often dubbed as ‘old regionalism’) and advocates of ‘new regionalism’ (Hettne 2005).

If regions are reinterpreted as malleable realities, their boundaries change as they grow or shrink over time. While states play an important role as key driving forces, non-state actors too may lead many forms of regionalism. For instance, private banks may support regional economic networks through common banking agreements regardless of the pace of state-driven institutional regionalism (Iheduru 2012). Civil society groups may build transnational linkages and support or oppose conventional forms of state-driven regionalism (Armstrong, Bello, Gilson and Spini 2011; Fioramonti 2013b). Informal traders operating across borders generate ‘cultural’ regions that are often defined by kinship, common languages and shared visions of local economic development (Peberby and Crush 2001). The so-called ‘peace parks’ developed across Sub-Saharan Africa are interesting examples of collaboration between state authorities, private foundations, environmental organizations and local communities in the trans-frontier management of wildlife and natural resources (Ramutsindela 2012).

Supranational institutions (whether of global scope such as the UN, or of regional scale, such as the EU, the AU or Mercosur) may contribute to define, advance or undermine forms of regionalism. For some analysts, the reason why these supranational actors can drive regionalism is that they possess some state-like characteristics, including the capacity to promote policies and exert influence at the global level (Langenhove 2011). The very concept of interregionalism, which has recently become an important aspect of international governance, is in itself demonstrating that regions indeed enjoy a degree of ‘actorness’, which in turn influences how regionalism develops and its quantitative and qualitative characteristics (Langenhove 2011). Moreover, in a multipolar international system in which emerging powers seek to influence the norms of global governance, cross-regional learning and interregional cooperation have become critical features of the international political economy (Hanggi and Ruland 2006). For example, the so-called South-South cooperation between Latin American, African and Asia groupings can be considered a form of interregionalism, just as much as the Economic Partnership Agreements between the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries or the EU-AU joint strategy. In short, new regionalism perspectives take into account the fact that, in contemporary political affairs, states have lost their monopoly over political authority, with important roles played by private and/or supranational forms of governance (Genschel and Zangl 2008).

For proponents of the new regionalism approach, regions are becoming less formalized and are taking different forms, as was the case in the pre-modern era. A region can be, variously, “a regional space, a translocal social system, an international society, a regional community and a regionally institutionalized polity” (Hettne 2005, 548). As regionalism becomes a multifaceted worldwide phenomenon led by a variety of at times complementary and at times competing actors, regions can enjoy different degrees of institutionalization, stability and even visibility. Some of them may be ‘core regions,’ others may be ‘intermediate regions’ or even ‘peripheral regions’ (Hettne 2005). While the concept of regional integration has been dominated by the European example, loose forms of trade cooperation (even trade blocs), monetary collaboration, developmental regionalism and security partnerships have become common throughout the world (Hettne 2005). Moreover, a link can also be drawn between micro-regions (which operate at the sub-national or sub-continental level, such as for instance the many African regional economic communities) and macro-regions, which may be continent-wide (e.g. the AU) or span across continents (e.g. the Arab League or the Organization of American States) (Grant, Mitchell and Nyame 2012). The new regionalism approach points out that institutionalized forms of regional integration and/or cooperation are just the most visible examples of a myriad of regionalization processes, most of which are occurring under the radar of political scientists and policy makers, often through the interaction of informal actors (Soderbaum 2012).

Whether one sees regionalism through the lens of ‘old’ or ‘new’ approaches, there is little doubt that the most visible forms of regionalization have been supported and accelerated by the globalization of the world economy. Trade reforms, economic interdependence and new regulations in the field of finance and investment have generated significant incentives for states, businesses and civil society to pursue regional agendas. For some social groups, regionalism was the only way to build comparative advantages and compete in the global economy. For some countries, it was an inevitable course of events to share the benefits and costs of economic globalization. For business, regionalism was a way of opening up investment opportunities. For civil society, it was an instrument to overcome national jurisdictions and achieve greater critical mass (Scholte 2013).

According to Walter Mattli, regionalism can be described as the outcome of the interaction between economic incentives and the quest of countries to pursue economic growth (Mattli 1999). As the world economy globalizes, regional markets enable individual countries to reap the benefits of economic interdependence and compete on the global scene. A similar view is held by the promoters of ‘open regionalism’, who see the drive for economic integration as a consequence of the expansion of neoliberal globalization, whereby countries have accepted the inevitability of free trade (and, in theory, of the free movement of people) across national borders (Cable and Henderson 1994). Though their primary focus is on free trade areas, common markets and customs unions, most institutionalized regionalization processes have been crafted in response to and to support the neoliberal model of economic globalization.

As mentioned, for proponents of neo-functionalism and inter-governmentalism alike, regionalism has forever been a top-down technocratic governance process. The literature on the democratic deficit of regional institutions, particularly the EU, provides a wide range of views on the inherent relationship between the evolution of contemporary regionalism and the weakening of national democratic accountability (Follesdal and Hix 2006). It can be argued that one reason why citizens have traditionally accepted top-

down forms of regional governance is that, despite their democratic deficit, they seemed to deliver substantive benefits. As trade liberalization brought about economic growth in an age of global market expansion, top-down regional institutions enjoyed some degree of output legitimacy (Scharpf 1999). Of course, in some regions, neoliberal economic globalization has been mitigated by an emphasis on the 'social' elements of regional integration. The former president of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, was among the first to popularize the term 'European social model' in the mid-1980s by designating it as an alternative to the American form of free-market capitalism. Nowadays, several regional institutions in Africa, Asia and Latin America have enacted regional social policies dealing with migration, social rights and cohesion, albeit with varying degrees of success. The basic idea behind social integration is that "economic and social progress must go hand in hand", that "economic growth, in other words, is to be combined with social cohesion" (Jepsen and Pascual 2005, 234). By building on the literature on varieties of capitalism (Hall and Soskice 2001) and on the research on comparative welfare regimes (Esping Andersen 1990), a significant part of the literature has highlighted the fundamental role of social policy in underpinning regional integration, while drawing attention to the tensions between the twin goals of market liberalization and equitable social development (Deacon, Hulse and Stubbs 1997; Hay, Watson and Wincott 1999; Streeck 1999; Sharpf 2002; Vaughan-Whitehead 2003).

The inherent contradictions of the neoliberal technocratic approach to regionalism were more or less successfully tempered until the mid-2000s. A first sign that something was changing in the way in which neoliberal integration was progressing came from South America in 2005, with the demise of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas due to popular contestation and political shifts in the region (Botto 2013). At the same time Mercosur, the largest common market in South America, entered a critical phase from which it has not yet recovered. According to scholars of Latin American integration, trade-driven regionalism seems to have 'peaked' in the region and new institutions, such as UNASUR, are unlikely to move the agenda forward (Malamud and Gardini 2012). In 2007, interregional free trade negotiations between Europe and Africa also collapsed due to the opposition of many African governments and a global network of civil society groups to the establishment of the Economic Partnership Agreements, which had been designed to reform the traditional non-reciprocal relationship between Europe and its former colonies in order to bring it into line with the global trading rules established by the WTO (Fioramonti 2013c).

These tensions have been further exacerbated by the global economic crisis. In Europe, this has become particularly evident with the sovereign-debt debacle and the consequent weakening of the Eurozone. There is little doubt that the Euro-crisis has had a significant impact on the inherent teleology of regional integration. Although the process of regional integration has evolved through a series of crises, what distinguishes the current predicament is its impact on the desirability of integration as a form of governance (Telò 2012). While previous crises were mainly seen as stumbling blocks within the internal evolution of regionalism and had a mostly domestic impact, the current crisis has reverberated globally, with serious repercussions not only for the appeal of the neoliberal model of integration, but also for the very foundations of economic and monetary integration per se (Fioramonti 2012b).

Regional integration is being increasingly questioned not only in Europe, but also in other regions of the world. If the European project fails to deliver on its promises of stability,

wellbeing and solidarity, then it is likely that other regions will refrain from pushing for full-blown integration, perhaps privileging less demanding forms of cooperation. There is indeed growing criticism of Eurocentric approaches to regionalism, not only among scholars, but also among leading policy makers (Lazarou 2012; Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010). In particular, emerging powers in Africa, Asia and South America have become more assertive about the need to find different ways to promote regional governance in a world in which traditional power distributions are being fundamentally called into question. The UN-sponsored institutional dialogue with regional organizations, instituted by Boutros-Ghali in the 1990s, has been suspended since 2007.

The 2011 Arab Spring too has produced an important shift affecting regionalism, not only within the Arab world. As autocratic states have fallen, citizens and civil society groups have become more vocal not only in national politics but also in regional processes. The very essence of this chain of revolutions, which have unfolded through a form of emulation and contagion across borders, can be seen as a form of regionalism 'from below'. The Arab Spring has also had a direct impact on regionalism in Europe and Africa, insofar as it has revealed the collusion between the two continents' regional institutions and the autocratic regimes resisted by the uprisings. Indeed, the fall of dictators in North Africa confirmed the dubious democratic credentials of Europe's interests in region, undermining the credibility of the EU as a genuine promoter of democracy (Cassarino and Tocci 2012). Moreover, the crisis was met with a haphazard and uncoordinated approach on the part of the European member states and has exacerbated internal tensions within the EU, leading to mutual recriminations and threats to suspend the Schengen agreement, one of the key pillars of the European integration process. More generally, the current crisis has highlighted the EU's internal fragility on migration management and the lack of solidarity among its member states (Ceccorulli 2012). In North Africa and the Middle East, regional institutions have systematically failed to connect with these countries' local populations and with the variety of civil society forces. Influenced by preconceived notions, the EU and the AU have been unable to engage in dialogue with local social movements, especially those animated by religious convictions, and have tended to superimpose their own priorities (often dictated by a narrowly conceived agenda of stability and security) over the legitimate demands of the citizens (Cassarino and Tocci 2012).

From the postwar period until the global economic crisis, most scholars have been looking at regionalization processes as politically neutral phenomena in international affairs. Research in this field has been generally restricted to the 'quantity' of regionalism, rather than its 'quality'. Whether attempting to explain the gradual devolution of authority from nation states to supranational institutions (as is the case with neo-functionalism) or demonstrating the continuous bargaining process involving national governments (as is the case with intergovernmentalism), mainstream approaches to regional cooperation and integration have traditionally refrained from looking at the quality of regionalization processes (Haas 1958; Moravcsik 1993). Will there be more or fewer regions in the world? Will regional institutions replace the nation state? Will regional governance become predominant in the years to come? Yet, the current crises force us to assess the state of regionalism in the world not only in terms of its predominance and diffusion, but also – and more importantly – in terms of how, and indeed if, it contributes, towards the wellbeing of our societies.

Regionalism is not an end in itself. Looking at the current European crisis, some analysts have maintained that if the EU “develops and consolidates its power at the expense of weaker countries, and poorer elements of society, this is hardly a laudatory process, and certainly nothing to be emulated by developing countries” (Holden 2012, 81). More radical analyses hold that “it has become necessary to abandon rather than seek to reform the regionalism that already exists” (Storey 2013, 48). This sentiment is echoed in Africa, where some have suggested that the continent should move away from a regionalist model based on market integration to espouse “a development paradigm that puts emphasis on maximizing human capabilities”, in a form of regionalism that begins with the people (Qobo and Motsamai 2012: 145). In this view, the critical test for the future of regionalism in Africa “will be how regional integration projects translate these gains into substantive freedoms for citizens at the domestic level, since it is well known that civil society engagement and influence on regional integration processes or in the patterns of region formation in the continent are very limited” (Qobo and Motsamai 2012: 149). Looking at Latin America, research has demonstrated that institutionalized regionalism has become a form of regional ‘presidentialism,’ reinforcing the power of executives at the expense of opposition forces and other voices within civil society (Malamud 2003). Regional institutions, especially UNASUR, have been used by South American national governments to reassert control over domestic arenas. This is particularly troubling in a region that already boasts “some of the least institutionalized democratic systems and some of the most unconstrained executives in the world” (Mosinger 2012: 175-176). In this regard, it is important to question the democratizing effects of regional integration, given that each specific type of regional organization “has potentially negative consequences for democratic quality even as it produces decidedly positive effects in other realms” (Mosinger 2012: 176). The same may be said about Africa, where regional institutions such as the AU and the SADC have been accused of being too friendly with authoritarian regimes and lacking capacity and legitimacy to make the continent more secure (Nathan 2010).

Over the past few years, citizen mobilizations against fiscal integration in Europe have grown to unprecedented levels (Pianta 2013). Social movements, non-governmental organizations and several political parties have been calling for mass demonstrations. Tensions have reached an all-time high in the countries where national governments have been forced to introduce harsh austerity policies (Storey 2013). Parties that question the pillars upon which the EU monetary union was founded are on the rise, and most traditionally pro-EU political formations have also questioned the trajectory of the current debate on fiscal union (Pianta 2013).

There are different types of regionalism and competing values, which become clearly evident in times of crises, thereby pushing citizens and civil society to demand a bigger say at the regional level. Contemporary crises seem to bring ‘the people’ back into the picture, at least insofar as various attempts at regional cooperation and integration stumble upon the ideas, values and expectations of the citizens. The Euro-crisis is not just a matter of scarce liquidity and fiscal imbalances. It is first and foremost a legitimacy crisis, which is revealing the fundamental limitations of an elite-driven model of regionalism (Fioramonti 2012b).

Conclusion: The resurgence of regionalism in a world in contraction?

As we have discussed, contemporary regionalism expanded in a phase of economic globalization. For a few months after the collapse of Wall Street in 2008, there was a sense that regional integration had somehow shielded Europe and the rest of the world from the excesses of US capitalism, thus prompting many to believe that the century of regionalism had finally come. However, the Euro-crisis and its seemingly endless contagion across a number of countries has shown how the type of regionalism pursued in Europe may have actually weakened financial and social safety nets, thus rendering the entire region more susceptible to external shocks than many had expected. As Europe struggles to deliver in terms of economic growth, longstanding issues of legitimacy and accountability have resurfaced, highlighting the fact that there are always winners and losers in regionalism and that top-down regional integration risks exacerbating existing social and economic inequalities, while depriving people of their most fundamental democratic rights.

While the global economic conjuncture appears to have triggered a crisis of top-down regional integration, this does not necessarily mean that regionalism will weaken as a form of governance. On the contrary, there are some critical factors pointing to the possibility that alternative forms of regionalism may soon become the prevalent form of governance in the 21st century. As we have already seen, scholars of the new regionalism remind us that there is more to regionalism than meets the eye. Because of the success of the EU's model of integration and the growth of institutionalized regionalism in other parts of the world, we have developed an understanding of regionalism that is highly selective and largely limited to state-centric forms of top-down regulation. If we expand our conceptualization of regionalism to include also cross-border informal networks, business partnerships that operate across national borders and civil society-driven forms of interaction uniting social movements, trade unions, environmental organizations and indigenous groups across neighbouring countries (in the management, for instance, of transfrontier natural resources) then the future may very well be characterized by a resurgence of regionalism.

The first critical factor influencing this process is the global economic crisis. Economic interdependence across the world has made entire nations and continents extremely vulnerable. Although it may have accelerated economic growth at the planetary level, globalization has also exacerbated inequalities within and between countries (OECD 2011; Credit Suisse 2013). Nowadays, national economies have become unable to tackle socio-economic imbalances, especially when they are caused by global economic dynamics. As a reaction against the phenomenon, many communities have rediscovered the importance of local economic empowerment. Throughout crisis-ridden Europe, for instance, alternative currencies have become more common, particularly as they privilege local economic development and shield against the centralized monetary control of the Euro (Fioramonti 2013a). International finance has also been contracting. More and more voices are being raised against forms of allocation of financial resources that privilege speculation at the expense of the so-called 'real economy.' It is now quite possible that some regions of the world may decide to introduce financial transaction taxes, which would encourage productive investment at the regional level (Fioramonti and Thumler 2013). Migration is also another interesting example. Although migration is often described as a global scale phenomenon, most migration flows actually happen within regions and, more often than not, across countries sharing a border (UNDESA

2012). Because of the economic crisis, we have seen an increase in short-term, short-distance migration as opposed to the long-term intercontinental flows that dominated previous periods. In Spain, many migrants from Latin America have returned to their home countries due to unemployment, while many Spaniards have moved to neighbouring France and Germany. As the global economic crisis worsens, especially in the global North, it is not inconceivable that global flows of economic migrants will slow down, overtaken by short-distance (and potentially short-term) migration within the same micro-regions. To paraphrase a bestselling book celebrating globalization, one could say that the world is likely to become much less 'flat' in the next decades (Friedman 2005).

The second factor is climate change. Despite the hesitation with which the international community has been pushing the post-Kyoto agenda, it is inevitable that new regulations will be introduced to limit the emissions of greenhouse gases in both industrialized nations and the so-called developing countries. Most nations have already introduced carbon taxes, which are likely to become more stringent and onerous in the near future (Randers 2012). In many respects, the climate change debate at the international level has become the new locus of the global struggle for power in international relations. With the stalemate affecting the Doha round on global trade, the negotiations for a new climate regime have become the new battle ground for the future of the global economy. As the climate change regime supersedes the current world trade system, the exchange of goods and services is likely to experience a slow but steady re-localization, in which 'mileage' will begin to make a difference. Geographical distances will matter ever more in the process of designing a climate-compatible trading system, which means that what can be produced and consumed regionally/locally will become more profitable than what can be shipped across the planet. Innovative reforms in corporate governance are also attesting to a shift in the way in which businesses operate. As natural capital accounting, transport costs and environmental impacts become central in the business paradigm of the 21st century, production and consumption will become increasingly regional and local (Sukhdev 2012).

The third factor is energy. As fossil fuels run out, and the extraction of sub-soil resources becomes more complex and expensive (because of both physical constraints and regulations), renewable sources of energy will become more prevalent (Heinberg 2012). This will allow local businesses to produce energy locally and exchange it within a certain proximity. As energy production is diversified and localized, there will be a contraction of global energy transportation (Rifkin 2011). Energy production will follow the geophysical features of each territory and relatively small grids will be developed to allow for a continuous exchange within predefined, homogenous geographical areas. As renewable energy can be produced anywhere on the planet, macro-grids will be redesigned into intelligent micro-grids connecting consumers within a smaller geographical area, thus reducing the amount of energy dispersion caused by long-distance transportation.

Evidently these three factors are correlated and mutually reinforcing. High energy costs make an economic recovery much less likely. Climate change makes it imperative to switch to renewable and less polluting forms of energy. Environmental regulations make globalized markets less likely to stay profitable in the long run, which means that business activities may refocus from the global to the regional/local level to seek new profits. At the same time, such a transition to localized forms of production and

consumption does not necessarily mean a resurgence of national protectionism. As this new economy will need to be embedded in the geographic, climatic and ecosystemic conditions of each territory, national borders will stay porous. As a matter of fact, regional cross-border exchanges may very well become more common than they are now. By exchanging energy locally, contiguous communities across national borders will push for further integration. This drive for regional integration will be particularly strong in large nations, where distances from the periphery to the centre are longer than those between cross-border peripheries. Territorial continuity will matter a great deal, which means that geographically homogenous areas will have an incentive to build common infrastructure, regardless of whether they reside within the same nation or cut across multiple countries. Micro-economic regions are therefore likely to mushroom and may easily have spill-over effects in the political and social fields too. While nation states will remain the key locus of governance, they will most likely transition from being monopolists of regulation to being facilitators of bottom-up integration. In turn, they will find themselves connected with each other through the web of micro-regions spanning their borders.

The localization of the economy would also change the way in which business operates nationally. As the global market becomes less profitable, business will have an incentive to trade locally and regionally. In some cases, it will be more profitable to do commerce with neighbouring communities in a foreign country than with other far away communities within the same nation. In the current top-down regulatory framework, regional trade has only prevailed in Europe, where a common market has become a daily reality for goods, services and workers. In South America, Asia and especially Africa, by contrast, most trade volumes are directed outside the region. Although regionalization has generated new avenues for intra-regional trade, the profitability of global markets has done nothing to incentivise a serious reorientation of business activities within regions rather than between them. Thus, the prospect of a global contraction of economic activity may very well reinforce business integration at the regional level.

The type of 'deep' regionalism that would emerge out of this process would be fundamentally different from the one we have at the moment. It would be driven by bottom-up pressures rather than by top-down regulations. It would rise organically as public institutions, businesses and civil society reorient themselves as key drivers of a new economic paradigm. In many respects, the shift to localized economic empowerment will reinforce regionalism as the main locus of sustainability. Nations will have an incentive to support the establishment of 'sustainability corridors' across borders, in terms of infrastructural development, energy production and exchange as well as market interaction. As local networks of energy and economic interdependence grow within these micro-regions, nation states will find themselves mutually entangled in macro-regions of territorial continuity. Some of these may very well be as large as entire continents. This is what Jeremy Rifkin calls the shift "from globalization to continentalization" (Rifkin 2011: 61).

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