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Formal and Informal Regionalism

Fredrik Söderbaum

Introduction

Historically, the study of regionalism and regional integration has focused heavily on sovereignty transfer and political unification within inter-state regional organisations. This is seen in the innumerable studies on the European Union (EU) and other state-led regional projects, 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), and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR). The focus on formal (even formalistic) regionalism as a state-led and policy-driven project has frequently been combined with an analysis of official (in contrast with unofficial) economic flows of trade, capital, and people.

Closely related to this methodological bias is the strong tendency to explain variations from the ‘standard’ European case. Indeed, other forms of regionalism are frequently, where they appear, characterised as loose and informal (e.g. Asia) or simply as ‘failed’ (e.g. Africa). The problem is not European integration theory or practice per se, but rather the failure to acknowledge that it is a particular reading of formal and state-centric European integration – EU-style institutionalisation – that shapes perceptions about how regionalism looks, or should look.

The stance adopted in this chapter is that progress in the field of comparative regionalism will not be reached through simply celebrating differences between European integration and other regions. Rather, progress will be achieved by going beyond dominant (formal/formalistic and state-centric) interpretations of European integration and supranational institutions, and drawing more broadly upon alternative theories that highlight both formal and informal aspects of European integration that are more comparable to other regions.

In this context it is important to acknowledge that, since the late 1990s, research in the field of regional integration and regionalism has progressed, with both a broader and more nuanced interpretation of European integration (Diez and Wiener 2003), as well as with an increased emphasis on ‘soft’, de facto or ‘informal’ regionalism in Europe as well as other regions (Acharya 2001; Bach 1999; Söderbaum and Taylor 2008; Robinson et al. 2010). The relatively recent emphasis on such
patterns of regionalisation has spurred a fruitful debate regarding the various 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 multilevel governance (Bøås et al. 2005; Christiansen and Piattoni 2004; Katzenstein and Shiraishi 1997; Rugman 2005; Sandholtz and Stone-Sweet 1998).

This chapter will provide an overview of the concepts, theories, and debates on formal and informal regionalism, and identify directions in which it should be moving. The first section focuses on theories and concepts. It tries to briefly clarify why some theories are so heavily geared towards formal regionalism, while others are much more focused on the formal–informal nexus, as well as informal regionalism per se. Related to this, the section attempts to bring some conceptual order to the many alternative meanings of ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ regionalism and the relationship between these two broad processes. The following two sections provide empirical illustrations from Asia and Africa concerning how the formal–informal nexus can be analysed. These two sections are relevant because they provide examples of how to go beyond hegemonic emphases on formal regionalism, and how non-European cases of regionalism are important for the further development of comparative regionalism over the formal–informal nexus. The chapter concludes by summarising the strengths and weaknesses of studies in this area, and reflects on what future research needs to focus upon in order to illuminate further the formal–informal nexus.

Debates about Formal and Informal Regionalism

Many scholars in the study of regionalism have concentrated on determining what types of regions are the most functional, instrumental, and efficient to ‘rule’ or govern. In much of the mainstream literature in political science and economics, both macro-regions and micro-regions have been taken as pre-given, defined in advance of research, and have often been seen as particular inter-state or policy-driven frameworks. Integral to this reasoning is that regions are believed to exist ‘out there’ – identifiable through material structures and formal regional organisations.

Even if classical theories of regional integration and cooperation – such as functionalism and neofunctionalism – appreciated liberal–pluralist assumptions as well as cordial relations between states and non-state actors for the promotion of commerce, these early perspectives were subordinated to the analysis of what ‘states’ did in the pursuit of their so-called ‘interests’, as well as the consequences of state–society relations for supranational and intergovernmental regional organisations. Neofunctionalists emphasise the deliberate design of institutions, which are seen as the most effective means for solving common problems. These are, in turn, instrumental for the creation of functional as well as political spillover, and ultimately lead to a redefinition of group identity around the regional unit (Hurrell 1995, 59; see Haas 1958 and 1964).
Institutionalism, in its various versions, has become the contemporary form of functionalism and neofunctionalism. One of the dominating approaches of new institutionalist theories – neoliberal institutionalism – is based on a number of core arguments (Keohane 1984; Mansfield and Milner 1997). In common with their neorealist comrades, neoliberal institutionalists share the idea of an anarchical system in which states are largely rational and unitary actors, but ‘institutions matter’ because of the benefits that they provide (especially in the procurement of public goods or the avoidance of negative externalities from interdependence), meaning that state behaviour is constrained and affected by variations in the degree of institutionalisation across different issue areas of international and regional politics.

Probably the most promising comparative study on institutional design is Acharya and Johnston’s (2007a), who ask why different forms of institutionalisation develop in different regions, and whether variation in institutional design leads to variation in the nature of cooperation; hence institutional design is analysed both as dependent and independent variable (Acharya and Johnston 2007b, 2, 15). Acharya and Johnston’s study extends beyond the rationalist (and neofunctionalist) approach to institutional design in order to engage constructivist and other approaches. It covers both formal and informal rules, and identity as well as norms, which is seen as the formal as well as informal ideology of the institution. In this way, their approach is able to account for the so-called ‘ASEAN Way’, which is based on informality, flexibility, consensus, and non-confrontation (Acharya and Johnston 2007c, 245). With regard to Asian institutions, they point out:

One of the main lines of difference is between the ‘formal’ informality of Asian institutions and the ‘formal’ formality of those in other regions. That is, the ASEAN states, for instance, have deliberately and carefully designed their institutions to be informal. And in other regions the formality of the institutions has been a cover for the informality or the weakly legalised way in which they have functioned. (Acharya and Johnston 2007c, 246)

Neorealism analyses the formation of regions from the outside in. The structural features of the anarchical system make the states – which are looked upon as unitary and rational egoists – predisposed towards competition and conflict. Regions and regionalism may occur under certain circumstances, for instance, when the distribution of power is opening up for cooperation, either through geopolitical reasons, or through the politics of alliance formation (especially in order to counter the power of another state or group of states, within or outside the region) (Gilpin 1987). A central neorealist proposition is that a hegemon or ‘stabiliser’ can stimulate the emergence of regional cooperation and regional institutions in a variety of ways (see Hurrell 1995, 51–3).

Barry Buzan (1983) challenged conventional neorealism, and argued that power theorists underplayed the importance of the regional level in international relations (IR). Buzan’s well-known invention of a ‘regional security complex’ – originally defined as ‘a set of states whose major security perceptions and concerns are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or
resolved apart from one another’ (1991, 190) – had a profound and positive impact on the research field in the 1980s and 1990s. Buzan’s early perspective had state-centric origins. For instance, security complexes were seen as ‘miniature anarchies’, and in a rather orthodox manner the states were taken more or less as ‘given’, and as the units in the international system. Buzan also shared the conventional neorealist conviction that strong states make strong and ‘mature’ regions (cooperative ‘anarchies’), whereas weak states, in their quest for power and security, tend to create (regional) conflicts and ‘immature’ regions, or are considered so weak that they do not form a region at all. Not surprisingly, Western Europe (and the EU in particular) is an example of the former, whereas weak states in Africa, for example, create weak regions. In collaboration with Ole Weaver, Buzan has subsequently revised the regional security complex theory in order to take account of his switch to the constructivist method, and to move away from state-centric assumptions. The new definition of a regional security complex is ‘a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both, are so interlinked that their security problems cannot be reasonably analyzed apart from one another’ (Buzan and Weaver 2003, 44). Buzan argues that the constructivist approach is necessary if one is to keep the concept of security coherent, while adding ‘new security sectors’ – economic, environmental, and societal – beyond the traditional military and political ones. The new formulation allows for a deeper analysis of non-state actors and informality, and that regions are even less ‘given’.

The view that regions must not be taken for granted, nor be analysed as regional organisations, is particularly emphasised in other types of constructivist and post-structuralist scholarship. As Jessop (2003, 183) points out, ‘rather than seek an elusive objective … criterion for defining a region, one should treat regions as emergent, socially constituted phenomena’. From such a perspective, all regions are socially constructed, and hence politically contested. The emphasis is placed on how political actors (state as well as non-state) perceive and interpret the idea of a region, and notions of ‘regionness’ (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000; Hettne 2005). It is clear that such (inter)subjective understandings of regions transcend more narrow interpretations of formal regionalism, which in turn pose certain challenges for systematic comparison.

The key point in this is that from such a constructivist and reflectivist perspective, the puzzle is to understand and explain the process through which regions are coming into existence and being consolidated – their ‘becoming’, so to speak – rather than a particular set of activities and flows within a pre-given region or (formal) regional framework. In this kind of analysis, regional inter-state organisations are seen as a second-order phenomenon, compared to the processes that underlie regionalisation in a particular geographical space. As a consequence, for constructivists and reflectivists, regions are not taken for granted; they are not seen as ‘natural’, organic, essential, or material objects, but rather as dynamic settings for social interaction, with a particular focus on the process through which they are ‘becoming’, and the way they are constructed/reconstructed by reflective actors. Because there are no ‘natural’ regions or given ‘interests’, the regions are, at least potentially, heterogeneous, with unclear spatial delimitations. Hence this kind
of scholarship is more concerned with the relationship between formal and informal regionalisation than regional institution-building and institutional design per se.

In this context it must be noted that, in recent years, social constructivism has also gained a more prominent place in the study of European integration (Christiansen et al. 2001). This line of thinking has entered the discussion on European integration mainly as a spillover from the discipline of IR, and as a means of transcending the rather introverted debates between the conventional and rationalist theories of European integration referred to previously. The social constructivist approach in the European debate emphasises the mutual constitutiveness of structure and agency, and pays particular attention to the role of ideas, values, norms and identities in the social construction of Europe, which in turn draws attention away from the formality and particularities of the EU (Christiansen et al. 2001).

As Checkel points out, the differences between Europe and the rest of the world are overstated (even if some differences remain); ‘if not yet completely gone, then the days of sui generis arguments about Europe are numbered, which is very good news indeed’ (2007, 243).

This review shows that there is a rich variety of market and society actors that have begun to operate within, as well as beyond, state-led institutional frameworks, illustrating a complex relationship between formal and informal regionalism. Hence the discourse on formal–informal regionalism is both expanding and vibrant. But new definitions of formality–informality compete with old definitions, resulting in a large number of alternative, and often competing, conceptualisations. Even if individual researchers often apply coherent definitions, the literature as a whole is incoherent, leading to a lack of cumulative knowledge. Hence a large number of partly overlapping and partly competing labels have been used in the debate in order to capture similar (but not always identical) phenomena, such as: top-down versus bottom-up regionalism; de jure versus de facto regionalisation; state-led regionalism versus market- and society-induced regionalisation; hard versus soft regionalism; and official versus unofficial/informal regionalism.

It is not possible to provide a solution to this conceptual pluralism. It is possible, however, to draw attention to some pitfalls. First, the many varieties of processes of formal and informal regionalism/regionalisation referred to above have a tendency to be rather metaphorical, without properly defining formality and informality in a strict sense. Formal processes often consist of official policies and codified interactions, which are often backed by written texts, legal treaties, or constitutions. Informal processes are non-codified series of events based upon mutual understandings, accommodations, and tacit agreements.

Another pitfall is that, unless handled with care, binary or dichotomised conceptualisations can prevent scholars from understanding the links between the two processes. This may lead to putting realities into boxes instead of revealing nuances, or exposing the logic of regionalism. In fact, there is a particularly strong tendency to dichotomise state and non-state actors. Frequently, regionalism is defined as a state-led project, and regionalisation as a (non-state) societal process (see Gamble and Payne 1996; 2003), which has led several scholars to describe the regional phenomenon in terms of regionalism versus regionalisation (conceived
in terms of state versus non-state actors). This conceptualisation is inconsistent, however, since it excludes non-state actors of political agency. As Bøås, Marchand, and Shaw (2003, 201) pointed out, ‘regionalism is clearly a political project, but it is obviously not necessarily state-led, as states are not the only political actor around. … we clearly believe that, within each regional project (official or not), several competing regionalizing actors with different regional visions and ideas coexist’. This is by no means equivalent to rejecting the state. States and intergovernmental organisations are often crucial actors and objects of analysis in contemporary regionalism, although some analysts and approaches certainly privilege them more than others. It is therefore more consistent to define ‘regionalism’ as the policy and project, whereby state and/or non-state actors cooperate and coordinate strategy within a particular region or as a type of world order. Regionalism is usually associated with a formal programme, and often leads to institution building. ‘Regionalisation’ refers to the process of cooperation, integration, cohesion and identity creating a regional space (issue-specific or general), and involves state as well as non-state actors. For Fawcett (2005, 25), ‘At its most basic it [regionalisation] means no more than a concentration of activity – of trade, peoples, ideas, even conflict – at the regional level. This interaction may give rise to the formation of regions, and in turn, to the emergence of regional actors, networks, and organisations’. And processes of regionalisation can be both formalised as well as informalised.

Formal and Informal Regionalism in East Asia

There exists no consensus on a definition of the Asian region. The meaning of regionalism has changed in relation to the question of what sub-regions should be included and excluded, what dimensions of regionalism should be investigated (such as security, economics, politics, and identity), and over the particular theoretical perspectives employed. Conventionally, Asia has been divided into the regions Central Asia, Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, with a blurred border towards the Middle East. Most literature in relation to regionalism has focused on East Asia, that is, Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. This diversity reveals the difficulty in taking the region as ‘given’ as well as the limitations of focusing on one particular regional organisation.

Still, a considerable body of literature on regionalism in East Asia is concerned with the study of ASEAN (see Acharya 2001). A major reason for this emphasis, at least historically, appears to be that ASEAN has been one of the few sustainable regional organisations in the larger East Asian region – at least partly reflecting the preference for studying state-led regional organisations instead of broader processes of regionalisation and region-formation. During the Cold War the core of ASEAN cooperation was in its joint effort to consolidate the member nation-states and to enhance stability. These goals were driven by a narrow political elite in what were, at that time, relatively fledgling and fragile state formations.
Communism was the primary internal and external threat. The *raison d’être* of ASEAN – bulwarking against communist expansion – is of course long absent from the political landscape; the focus has shifted to achieving increased economic development and to ensuring security in a new context.

During recent decades, an important part of the regionalism debate in East Asia has focused on collective identity formation and informal, or ‘soft’, regionalism (Acharya 2001; Katzenstein 2000). The primary concern of this scholarship is with the relationship between formality and informality, rather than informal processes *per se* (such as for instance the Chinese diaspora). In particular, scholars seek to account for the non-legalistic style of decision-making in this region, and the fact that there is no transfer of national sovereignty to a supranational authority. There exists a dense network of informal gatherings, working groups and advisory groups, particularly within ASEAN, but also in the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), and more recently the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea) (see Gaens 2008; Gaens et al. 2009). This informal style of decision-making incorporates its own innate code of conduct that is often referred to as the ‘ASEAN Way’ (or ‘soft institutionalism’), which, in contrast with European-style (and North American) formal bureaucratic structures and legalistic decision-making procedures, is built around discreetness, informality, pragmatism, consensus-building, and non-confrontational bargaining styles (Acharya 1997, 329). Further, the ASEAN Way reflects, to some extent, the illiberal underpinnings of the ‘Asian values’ construct, which stresses a communitarian ethic (‘society over the self’) in explaining the region’s economic dynamism (Acharya 2002: 27–8). This means that there is a considerable emphasis on cultural factors in explaining the ASEAN Way and its differences from Europe.

There exists a vigorous debate about the impact and efficiency of the informal and non-legalistic approach of Asian regional organisations (see Acharya and Johnston 2007a). The 1997/98 Asian financial crisis not only underlined the interdependence of Northeast and Southeast Asian countries, but also, according to Higgott (2002, 2), ‘exposed the weakness of existing regional institutional economic arrangements’. To some observers, the crisis has undermined confidence in the soft institutionalism of the ASEAN Way, and underscored the need for deeper institutionalisation and stronger commitments from countries in the region. Following the region’s recovery from the 1997/98 financial crisis, the East Asian countries moved to institutionalise annual leaders’ summits and ministerial dialogues through the ‘ASEAN+3’ framework. The most concrete project is the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI), which was adopted in May 2000 in order to provide emergency foreign currency liquidity support in the event of a future financial crisis. But broader cooperation also exists across a range of areas, such as small- and medium-scale industry development, human resource development, agriculture, tourism, and information technology (Nesudurai 2005, 167).

The question arises whether the strong informal nature of East Asian regionalism is having an impact on broader comparative discussion on regionalism. As indicated earlier, the comparative discussion is premature
and there are few systematic or organised comparisons of the main regions in the world. There are many studies that explicitly or implicitly compare Asian regionalism with European integration, and a large portion of these characterise East Asian regionalism as looser and more informal, sometimes even as ‘underdeveloped’ (Choi and Caporaso 2002, 485). It is problematic, however, to regard EU-style institutionalisation as an ideal model for regionalism. Such analyses (and prescriptions) favour a particular way of formality at the expense of alternative outcomes and dynamics. A particularly effective remedy for such misplaced comparison with European integration is the edited collection by Bertrand Fort and Douglas Webber (2006). In a key contribution to that volume, Amitav Acharya (2006, 312–13) points out that rather than elevating the European model over the Asian experience as a preferred model of regionalism, it is more productive to recognise that regional cooperation is a difficult and contested process that will throw up different, equally legitimate, outcomes. Indeed, as Acharya and Johnston point out in their more recent volume, ‘more formally institutionalised regional groups do not necessarily produce more effective cooperation… More informal groups such as ASEAN have had a discernible impact in changing the preferences and norms of their members’ (Acharya and Johnston 2007c, 268–9). Acharya and Johnston’s important conclusion is that ‘greater formality [e.g. a shift from consensus to majority voting] may actually affect cooperation negatively’ (ibid., 270).

Formal and Informal Regionalism in Africa

The ideological foundation of regional cooperation and integration in Africa is evidenced in the pan-African visions and series of treaties developed within the framework of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and, more recently, the African Union (AU) and the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) (Asante 1997; Murithi 2005). While earlier strategies, from the 1960s through to the 1980s, were built around state-led industrialisation, import substitution, and collective self-reliance, the dominant view since the early and late 1990s is that Africa ‘must unite’ in order to avoid its marginalisation in the global economy, and it should instead exploit the opportunities provided by economic globalisation. Indeed, an overarching market-orientation in combination with EU-style institutionalisation is the official strategy adopted by most of Africa’s main regional cooperation and integration schemes, such as AU/NEPAD, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA).

The academic debate about regionalism in Africa often focuses on state-led regional integration frameworks. Two partially overlapping schools of thought dominate the debate. Both are state-centric, and biased in favour of formal regional organisations, while largely neglecting underlying societal logic. The first line of
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What distinguishes the second, ‘pan-African’, school of thought is a set of synoptic overviews of African regional organisations and political–economic relationships, which are then coupled with demands for the strengthening of pan-African regional organisations and the so-called regional economic communities (RECs) of the envisioned African Economic Community (AEC) (Asante 1997; Muchie 2003). It is noteworthy that the pan-African line of thought often takes the EC/EU experience as inspiration, and as a justification for the development of pan-African regionalism. Indeed, despite their foundational differences, the two strands of thought make both implicit and explicit comparisons with the EU, and both come to a similar conclusion regarding how successful regionalism can be built.

A third and smaller group of scholars is more sceptical about whether the restructured regional organisations will be able to attain their goals of highly developed institutional frameworks (nearly always modelled on the EC/EU), with attendant economic and political integration. The scepticism of this group has generated a radically different interpretation of regionalism in Africa, associated with various approaches centring on critical political economy and new regionalism/regionalisms (Bach 1999; Boås et al. 2005; Grant and Söderbaum 2003; Hentz and Boås 2003; Söderbaum 2004). These approaches obviate the artificial separation, in the African context, of state and non-state actors, and of formal–informal, that is associated with traditional regional approaches.

The particular importance of informal regionalism in the African context relates both to the informal economy and to the informal nature of politics. These informal processes need to be studied in their own right. It is undisputed that many parts of Africa are characterised by myriad informal and non-institutional interactions between a mosaic of informal workers and self-employed agents, families, business networks, petty traders, migrant labour, refugees, and so forth (see for example Iheduru 2003 and Boås 2003). In fact, the size of the informal economy in Africa, relative to the formal economy, is the highest in the world. Furthermore, in many parts of Africa informal employment represents up to around 75 per cent of non-agricultural employment and around half or more of total gross domestic product (GDP) in sub-Saharan Africa.

By the same token, political power in Africa is often ‘informalised’. State power within Africa is less about administration over the state and its attendant geographic area, with all the implications this might have regarding the provision of services to the populace, and more about the running of a relatively limited (in geographic terms and economic embeddedness) set of resources that are the sources of revenue and the foundations for entrenching power through patronage. Indeed, the informalisation of politics on the continent inevitably impacts upon the types and varieties of regionalism in Africa. What this means is that informal and formal patterns of regionalisation often tend to be linked in a variety of ways.
'Shadow regionalism’ – or what Bach refers to as ‘trans-state regionalisation’ (Bach 1999, 2003, 2005) – is an important ingredient of regionalism portrayed by the so-called new regionalists. Shadow regionalism suggests that regime actors use their power positions within the state apparatus in order to erect a complex mode of regionalisation, characterised by informality and driven by rent-seeking and personal self-interest. Control of the state serves the twin purposes of lubricating the patronage network and satisfying the selfish desire of elites to enrich themselves – in many cases, in spectacular fashion. Taking the example of the Great Lakes Region, Taylor and Williams argue that, for well-placed elites and business people, the violence in this region potentially offers substantial resources for those able to exploit them. Foreign involvement is not only about preserving national security and defeating enemies, but also about securing access to resource-rich areas, and establishing privatised accumulation networks that can emerge and prosper under conditions of war and anarchy (Taylor and Williams 2001, 273).

A number of African regional organisations are involved in different types of peace operations on the continent. The personalisation of politics, and relationships between heads of state in Africa – based on either empathy or animosity – are also recurrent in these regional peace operations (Hentz, Söderbaum, and Tavares 2009; see also Söderbaum and Tavares 2009). For instance, it would be difficult to understand Angola and Zimbabwe’s military deployments in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) if we did not account for the personal bond between Eduardo dos Santos, Laurent/Joseph Kabila, and Robert Mugabe. The same logic holds for the past ties between Presidents Ibrahim Babangida of Nigeria and Samuel Doe of Liberia; between Liberia’s Charles Taylor and Muammar Ghaddafi of Libya, Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d’Ivoire and Blaise Campaoré of Burkina Faso; or Abdou Diouf of Sénégal and João Vieira of Guinea-Bissau. This type of personalisation may have different effects on peacekeeping and peacebuilding. At least in the Liberian conflict, it was contingencies and personal relations between ECOWAS leaders and Liberian warlords – rather than any structured plans – that led to the end of the war in Liberia. Personal relationships may of course also hinder successful outcomes. As Meyer (2009, 171) points out, the instrumentalisation of the region and interplay of particular interests among political elites make regionalisation in Central Africa considerably vulnerable to deadlocks, as it easily leads to discordance among states.

These observations show that regionalism is more complex (and not seldom more detrimental) than simply being an instrument to enhance an ambiguous ‘national interest’ (realism), or the procurement of the ‘public good’, or increased ‘trade’ (liberalism). Potentially, state actors create regionalisation in order to achieve private goals and promote particular (vested) interests rather than broader societal interests. Bach claims, for instance, that regional organisations constitute a means for ‘resource capture’ and international patronage (Bach 2005). This results in regionalisation without the implementation of formal regional integration. Hence the informal and the formal stand in a symbiotic and often complex relationship.

The type of shadow regionalism referred to here may be a goal in itself, but it may also be closely related to more formal and symbolic ‘regime boosting’
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regionalism (Söderbaum 2004). The latter refers to the practice adopted by many ruling regimes and political leaders in Africa of engaging in symbolic and discursive activities – praising the goals of regionalism and regional organisations, signing cooperation treaties and agreements, and taking part in ‘summitry regionalism’ – while remaining uncommitted to, or unwilling to implement, jointly agreed policies. Regionalism is thus used as a discursive and image-boosting exercise wherein leaders demonstrate support and loyalty towards one another in order to raise the status, image, and formal sovereignty of their often authoritarian regimes, both domestically and internationally (Boës 2003; Clapham 1996). As Herbst (2007, 144) correctly observes, ‘African leaders are extremely enthusiastic about particular types of regional cooperation, especially those that highlight sovereignty, help secure national leaders, and ask little in return’. The point is thus that African political elites continue to participate in regional organisations that have long records of failure. Those who believe that regional institutions exist in order to solve regional and collective problems cannot understand this tendency. Yet it is nonetheless understandable from a domestic perspective: ‘Regional institutions in Africa usually work when they help African leaders with their domestic problems’ (ibid., 129).

The Maputo Development Corridor (MDC) reveals a different pattern of the formal–informal nexus in Africa (Söderbaum 2006). Generally speaking, the Maputo corridor has been a largely informal cross-border micro-region for more than a century, constructed by millions of migrants, extensive informal trading as well as dense socio-ethnic interactions. Since the mid-1990s there has been a formal project in the making, officially known as the MDC, which is seen as a key component of the economic development policy in this part of Africa. The MDC is built around large-scale private investment in infrastructure and industry. What makes the case of the MDC interesting in the context of this chapter is the fact that whereas there is an intense debate on how the MDC affects the formal economy, there is a silence concerning the linkages and effects on the informal economy. The neglect of the informal economy – which constitutes between half and two-thirds of the total economy in Mozambique – can be seen in the gigantic financial resources devoted to large investment and infrastructure projects with only a small fraction devoted to local development and community participation, and hardly anything that targets the informal economy specifically. In fact, the informal economy is seen as a problem rather than a resource, and therefore the formal policy is entitled ‘Blocking Human Potential’ (Söderbaum 2006). An explicit statement by the Maputo Corridor Logistics Initiative (MCLI) clearly illustrates the negative attitude towards the informal sector (the MCLI is a membership organisation, composed of private infrastructure investors and service providers, as well as some public actors in South Africa); specifically:

The MCLI is not against informal trading per se, only the black market part of it, but it needs to be better organized. The Lebombo border post … looked like a pig sty because of the vendors. People lived there and traded there. Vendors were in danger, any moment they could get hit by a truck. Vendors
need to be capacitated about rules and regulations connected to trading etc., there are bodies for that. From a logistical point of view, the squatters/vendors living at the border-post had to be evacuated.¹

According to the dominant theories in the field, regionalism in Africa is often seen as weak, ‘failed’, or simply ignored. However, regionalisation in Africa is undoubtedly vibrant. But in order to understand the regional phenomenon properly, there is a need to account for both processes of formal and informal regionalisation, as well as the close link between such processes. In particular, there is need to go beyond analytical frameworks built from a particular reading of European integration and the associated exaggerated emphasis on formal and policy-led regionalism/regional integration. For similar reasons, we need to go beyond the related – yet false – assumption that there is necessarily a conflict between sovereignty and regionalism. Regionalism in Africa is often used in order to boost national sovereignty and regime interests.

The case of Africa has an important contribution for broader comparative studies of regional dynamics. Although informal regionalism is by no means absent in EU studies, the intense link between formal and informal regionalism/regionalisation represents one contribution by the African case to European and comparative regional integration studies. The African case has shown that one can, for instance, speak of relevant and truly regional dynamics and patterns that are not mirrored by formal regional efforts per se. The African and Asian cases also highlight that it is important not only to inquire into the informality underpinning/accompanying formal regional projects, but also to take a broader perspective on informal processes of regionalisation in their own right. Whereas scholarly debate on regional integration has made the step to compare Europe and Asia (often opposing the former to the latter in terms of formal versus informal), Africa needs to be inserted into this discussion in order develop a more genuinely global comparative regional integration agenda. For the same reasons, there are no convincing reasons why Latin America would be different in this regard.

Conclusion

There is a long tradition in the research field of regionalism focusing on formal regional organisations. This is above all a consequence of the dominance of rationalist and problem-solving theoretical perspectives, which privilege state-centric perspectives and relatively one-dimensional and often formalistic conceptualisations about regions. The increased emphasis on constructivist and reflectivist theorising since the late 1990s has led to a more pluralistic conceptualisation of regions. As a result there has been a more intense focus on soft, informal regionalism, as well as an intensified debate regarding the various ways

¹ Author’s telephone interview, CEO of the MCLI, December 2004.
in which state, market, and civil society actors relate and come together in different ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ processes of regionalisation. This is certainly positive, but what is needed in the future is a better conceptualisation of the formal–informal; indeed, all regions are simultaneously both formal and informal. In the present debate, formal and informal are almost invoked as metaphors, possibly too region-specific to be used for cumulative and comparative research.

The two empirical sections in this chapter (Africa and Asia) have been used in order to go beyond dominant emphases on formal regionalism and to illustrate how non-European cases of regionalism are important for the further development of comparative regionalism. The use of comparison is underdeveloped in the field of regionalism because, as the two sections show, many scholars specialise in a particular region, and in this process develop conceptual toolboxes and theories that are developed from/for their ‘own’ region. This is particularly a problem when dealing with informal processes of regionalisation, since these are sometimes believed to be context-bound. This can result in a parochialism, which may prevent scholars from recognising that they are often talking about similar or the same phenomena, but with different language and conceptualisations. One of the key conclusions of this chapter is that there is considerable scope for increased cross-fertilisation between different regional debates (see Söderbaum 2009).

There is, for instance, no reason to believe that soft institutionalism is a uniquely Asian phenomenon. Further, comparisons should not be limited to contemporary Asia and Europe, but would benefit from considering regionalism experience across various time periods. As pointed out earlier, the East Asian experience suggests that greater formality may lead to more inefficient regional cooperation. Hence the question for more systematic research is the extent to which this holds true beyond East Asia. Furthermore, there is nothing that suggests that either shadow regionalism or regime-boosting is uniquely African. Patron–client relationships, corruption and informal politics are not at all unique to Africa, and there is no reason to suggest that these aspects should be unique to regionalism in Africa. With regard to shadow regionalism, it may also be possible to draw contrasts with the EU in terms of the role of rules for cross-border activity. What is unique is that regional economic interactions have largely been seen as developing the impetus for the expansion of rules, whereas shadow regionalism in Africa suggests that informal trade thrives because ‘there are no rules’, or at least because of the continued presence of formal border disparities. It raises the possibility of research on the comparative political economy of regional economic activity and the role of rules, particularly given the common assumption within the EU that rules are vital to the flourishing of such activity.

Regime-boosting regionalism is often tied, on the one hand, to the supposedly specific characteristics of the African state–society complex, while on the other, to Africa’s particular insertion in the global order. Yet there are very compelling reasons to explore cases where regionalism is deepened in order to strengthen regime interests as well as what can be labelled ‘symbolic’, or discursive, regionalism. For example, there seems to be a strong sense of regime-boosting within ASEAN (backed by the tradition of non-intervention). There is also little doubt that regime-boosting
has been important historically in Europe. Here the position is quite interesting as some states have used Europe to legitimate their regimes (mirroring the African pattern) but others have used Euro-scepticism for similar aims. By the same token, the EU’s sometimes rhetorical commitment to the humanitarian and egalitarian reasons for supporting regionalism and the EU–Africa partnership may also be interpreted as discursive and image-building strategies (with other underlying ‘interests’), thus highlighting the role of procedures, symbols, ‘summitry’, and other discursive practices of regionalism around the world.

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