

Book Review

Regionalization in a Globalizing World: A Comparative Perspective on Forms,
Actors and Processes

By Michael Schulz, Fredrik Soderbaum and Joakim Ojendal (Eds.)

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Regionalisation is one of the most significant trends in contemporary international relations. Therefore, it is important to explore in depth the origins, dynamics and future prospects of the process of regionalisation. Regionalisation represents a reshuffle of power and decision-making from the national to the regional scene with far-reaching consequences.

The new wave of regionalisation needs to be seen against the background of the current transformation of the world: the growth of interdependence, trans-nationalisation and globalization. Today, the world society is made up of many transnational currents. For a long time, the world order was regarded as firmly established by a system of relationship between states. Now, we must learn to deal with a world that is highly mobile. The movement of people, capital, technology and ideas is as important today as control of territory was yesterday. We must therefore build an analytical framework which takes into account not only political issues but also economic behaviour and social aspirations.

Globalization is an empirical process of world integration driven by a variety of economic, cultural, political and ideological forces as seen in such areas as market expansion, a global production pattern as well as cultural homogenisation. Clearly, globalization deals with the integrative forces active within the world society, and the planet as a whole is the focus of study.

However, as the editors note “Working with regions means working with elusive entities, undefined boundaries, and newly invented concepts in the midst of a thoroughgoing structural change in our world order. .. A region, thus, is not a fixed entity; it may dissolve, and it may incorporate new ‘members’; and it may change its internal relations in various fields, ranging from the political and economic to the cultural.”

The term regionalisation is used generally to deal with three separate types of socio-political organization. Regionalisation is often used to mean the decentralisation of the state administration. These regions may have had in a prior time some sort of historical or cultural existence which the state recognizes at the time of creating administrative-political units. In other cases, the regions are created for the connivance of the central government on economic, transportation or population

density criteria. Such regionalisation is usually the result of difficulties or failures of the central government and a need to get the administration “closer to the people”.

Regionalisation can also be used to mean a trans-frontier area, an area which has common characteristics of an ethnic, cultural or geographic nature calling for cooperation on both sides of a state frontier, but which does not necessarily involve other parts of each state. Such effective trans-border structures have to be embedded in the local institutions and correspond to a certain commitment of the people on both sides.

The third sense in which regionalisation is often used is that of a multi-state link among states in a more or less contiguous way. ASEAN, SAARC, and the European Union are examples of such regionalisation. To make matters more complex, certain multi-state organizations which do not aspire to universal membership but whose members are not contiguous or even in the same part of the world are often called “regional Organizations”. The Commonwealth or the Organization of the Islamic Conference are such “regional organizations”.

This study, largely the work of scholars associated with the Department of Peace and Development Studies at the University of Goteborg, Sweden, deals primarily with regionalisation as multi-state cooperation and governance. Thus, here, regional cooperation can be defined as an open-ended process whereby individual states or other significant actors within a given geographic area act together for mutual benefit in certain fields, such as infrastructure, water, energy, and to deal with certain common challenges, in spite of conflicting interests in other fields of activity. Such regional cooperation may be highly structured and institutionalised but may also be based on looser structures and *ad hoc* efforts.

During the Cold War period (1945-1990), regionalisation was often organized from above in accordance with the bipolar structure of the Cold War and mainly in the interests of the superpowers. The current trends toward regionalisation are more spontaneous emerging in part from below through popular movement and from within the regions themselves. This new regionalisation is a more multidimensional phenomenon which involves the state, market-oriented actors, and civil society actors and covers economic, cultural, political, security, and environmental aspects.

Globalisation and regionalisation stand in a symbiotic relationship to one another, sometimes they are mutually reinforcing, at other times contradictory. The Charter of the United Nations, especially Article 53, not only legitimises the role of regional organizations and arrangements but also seeks to provide them with definite goals and objectives. The post-Cold War period may have released regionalisation from the dictates of the Soviet Union and the USA, but the end of the Cold War has not brought an end to politics as an expression of the will to power. Therefore, it is important for each geographic area in the process of regionalisation to ask what kind of actors are driving the project, with what means, and for what purposes?

Transcending top-down, state driven notions of regionalisation is particularly important in order to understand the spontaneous processes of regionalisation, the making of regional civil society as well as cross-frontier regions mentioned earlier. Thus it is necessary to analyse all the significant actors in the process. The most visible are the state authorities. However, “market forces” merit

close attention; business networks, firms, and banks all play a role. Some business leaders such as Jean Monnet for the European Union or Harry Oppenheimer for southern Africa played a visible and public role. Other market leaders act much more in the shadows as does, obviously, the powerful crime networks which saw the benefits of regional cooperation before political leaders. We must also look at what has been called “regionalisation from below” – the spectrum of influences stemming from regional migrant workers, tourism, student exchanges, mass culture as well as a sense of regional belonging.

As the editors write “Regionalisation is a global phenomenon, but certainly neither a deterministic nor a homogeneous one. It must be seen as a social project with no given outcomes. Projects may be formulated, they may succeed or they may fail. Much is also dependent on what popular legitimacy these social projects will be able to attract. If regionalisation should become increasingly sustainable as a global development strategy, as well as becoming a mechanism for enforcement of peace and development, it also has to go beyond elites, mobilizing broader support and activating a wider range of actors.”

This collection is a good overview of current analysis of regionalisation with a useful bibliography – an important tool for future research.