Comparative Regionalism ⦿

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Summary

The study of regionalism has experienced numerous transformations and focal points. Comparative regionalism has emerged as the next wave of scholarship on regional cooperation and integration in international relations. What differentiates comparative regionalism from this earlier scholarship? There are three research themes that characterize the field of comparative regionalism: (a) an empirical focus on regional identity formation as a way of distinguishing between autonomous regions, (b) decentering Europe as the main reference point of comparative regionalism, and (c) defining what is truly "comparative" about comparative regionalism. These research themes emerge in a global context, where regional cooperation and integration are being tested from all sides by events such as Brexit in Europe, elusive global cooperation in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and challenges to democratic stability across the globe. While the development of regionalism has primarily been concerned about the defining of regions and the world order context in which regional cooperation emerges and sustains itself, the interrelated themes of regional identity formation and the decentering of Europe in comparative regionalism drive the comparative regionalism agenda, giving substance to the identification and measurement of the "local" and other context-specific mechanisms of regionalism.

While these three themes are helpful in discerning the state of the comparative regionalism research agenda, they also have some limitations. While comparative regionalism is progressive in its integration of constructivist ideas of identity formation, its project of withering Eurocentrism, and its methodological flexibility, comparative regionalism research would be well served to incorporate more reflexive and interpretivist research practices and methods, particularly to serve the goal of offering new knowledge and theories of regional cooperation in the Global South that are not tethered to Europe.

Keywords: comparative regionalism, regional identity, agency, methodology, Eurocentrism

Subjects: Identity, Organization, International Relations Theory

Introduction

In his 2012 article, Amitav Acharya asked the question of whether comparative regionalism is a field "whose time has come"—a question driven by the observation of increased development of regional institutions outside of the West, coupled with the social-constructivist turn in international relations (IR) theory that brought ideational and normative elements into the study of regionalism (Acharya, 2012). Acharya ended the article by identifying "five crucial challenges" to the field of comparative regionalism, which, to summarize, focused on whether there should be theorizing about the composition, efficacy, and performance of regions; using inductive versus deductive theorizing; and the conceptualization of the autonomy of regions. Nearly 10 years after Acharya's article, the study of comparative regionalism has grown beyond its initial emergence as a response to post–Cold War macroprocesses of globalization and regionalization and the relevance of including area studies approaches to IR (Katzenstein, 2005). While ideational approaches to the study of regionalism have persisted and perhaps been privileged, scholars have taken up the challenges of comparative regionalism, creating a research agenda that not only lies at the intersections of comparative politics, IR, and area studies, but also diversifies engagement in inter- and intraregional comparisons, comparisons of institutional designs, explanations of variations in the informality of regions, and explorations beyond trade and security as the main drivers of regionalism.

Comparative regionalism has evolved to comprise of three main empirical strands: the empirical comparison of regional identities—that is, the conception of regions as structured and constituted in mutual entanglements based on their regional identities; a normative shift to decenter Europe and the European Union as the main reference points for comparison, leading to a focus on regional actors in the Global South; and a methodological focus on the richness of comparison—that is, that regions can and should be compared in time, within and across different spaces, and across scales—or what Söderbaum called "conceptual pluralism" (Börzel & Risse, 2016).

Much of the development of regionalism scholarship focuses on the periodization of the field—evidenced by the deliberate naming of "old," "new," and "comparative" regionalism. The periodization of the field of regionalism follows a relatively stable pattern of inquiry. For example, Söderbaum distinguished between these phases of development by contrasting comparative regionalism to old and new regionalism. Old regionalism conceptually starts by questioning the definition and theorizing of the "region" based on the degree of formality and scope of interactions led by states through regional organizations in a post–World War II context (Costa Buranelli & Tskhay, 2019); new regionalism makes distinctions between nonstate and state actors, formal and informal actors, and regionalism and the process of regionalization in a post–Cold War globalization context (Hveem, 2000; Söderbaum & Sbragia, 2010), and uses an integrated framework to capture and test the empirical dimensions of multifaceted manifestations of regionalism (Fioramonti & Mattheis, 2016). Comparative regionalism, born out of the need to move beyond "new regionalism" after 2 decades of the new regionalism, focuses on the interactions between the formal and informal, between state and nonstate, and across sectors in a "multiplex" world order that subsumes elements of a declining liberal world order into an increasingly complex arrangement of multiple, cross-cutting international orders (Acharya, 2017). What distinguishes old and new regionalism from comparative regionalism is the multitude of trends that animate a world order context

that sees the rise and importance of emerging powers. While this focus on comparative regionalism's temporal context and contestation over the definition of regionalism remains prominent, the emergence of comparative regionalism also elicits a shift to the empirical examination of the drivers that explain particular regional orders and configurations. For instance, work in comparative regionalism empirically compares the construction and manifestation of regional identities across and within regions, theorizing and comparing empirically work that decenters Europe and the European Union, the emergence of various spheres of regional governance, interregional comparisons on the basis of institutional design (Gomez-Mera & Molinari, 2014), variations in the role of regime types within formal regionalisms, comparisons of the degree of actorness or agency within organizations (Panke et al., 2020), and how regional configurations become sites of norm diffusion.

This article proceeds in four parts. The first part of the article explores comparative regionalism research and how the empirical focus on regional identities has created a pathway to examine and compare varying regional configurations, namely the comparison between more formal modes of regionalism and informal modes of regionalism. The second part emphasizes how the need to decenter Europe in the study of comparative regionalism has led to the emergence of studying regionalism in the context of agency. Specifically, this section points to comparative regionalism research that examines the role of bureaucratic actors and interactions between Global South regionalisms as agentic responses to the decentering of Europe. Third, the problem of comparison in comparative regionalism (De Lombaerde, 2011) is addressed by taking stock of the methodological tools used to compare between and within regions. Finally, areas where comparative regionalism research can continue to move forward are examined.

Moving Beyond Definitions: Regional Identity and Comparative Regionalism

Most studies of comparative regionalism start with recognizing the multitude of ways to define regions. Regionalism is often considered to be "multifaceted and pluralist" (Maclean, 1999), composed of "formal" and "informal" arrangements (Hettne, 1999; Söderbaum, 2011), varied in institutional design (Acharya & Johnston, 2007; Börzel & Risse, 2009; Söderbaum, 2004), and/or "open" yet woven within uneven globalizations (Boas et al., 1999). Regionalisms are also conceptualized and theorized as part of a process of transformation, often conceptualized as regionalization or regionness (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2010). However, as De Lombaerde (2011) highlighted, varying definitions and conceptualizations of regionalism are unavoidable. This is due in part to the rejection of statist conceptions of regional integration and cooperation in early regionalism scholarship and, instead, the use of social-constructivist IR theory as the preferred theoretical tool to conceptualize, define, and eventually compare regional configurations.

Old and new regionalism emerged as an analytic response to uneven economic, cultural, and technological globalizations; the proliferation of new states; and the quantitative rise of nonstate actors (Marchand et al., 1999). New regionalism responds to rationalist, neoliberal institutionalism literature that privileges functionalism and rational institutional design (Grieco, 1997; Keohane & Martin, 1995; Koremenos et al., 2001). "Old regionalism" or neofunctionalist perspectives emphasize the value of international institutions for their ability

to procure public goods while avoiding the negative externalities from interdependence (Soderbaum, 2011, p. 53). Under old and new regionalism, state behavior is constrained and affected by variations in the degree of institutionalization across different issue areas. Compared to the earlier regional integration literature of the neoliberal institutionalism mode, new regionalism takes the concept of regionalism to be a "more multifaceted and comprehensive phenomenon considering—state and non-state actors—political, economic, social, strategic, and demographic interactions within regions. New regionalism shifts focus away from formal institutions toward studying informal sectors, parallel economies, and non-state coalitions" (Acharya & Johnston, 2007, p. 10)

Early features of regionalism focused on the primacy, importance, and contestation of economic integration within a community as a prior condition to the development of other conceptions of integration. These studies often used the European Union as an example of regional integration. The EU's founding conditions and its viability as an economic union allowed researchers to dissect the components of its constitution. For example, Wiener and Diez (2004) provided three points of divergence as the constitution pertains to theorizing integration generally and explaining the EU specifically. They explain integration, analyze governance, and question the construction of the EU. While there is the notion that integration begins on the economic level, authors such as Mansfield and Solingen (2010) have called for a linkage between security relations and political economy. They argue that the lack of consensus on deriving an economic rationale for integration, particularly as it applies to welfare effects, creates a space for including security regionalism and political economy as alternatives to an exclusively economic-based explanation for integration.

Old regionalism examined how regional integration emphasized how deep structures of order dictate the discussion of integration. In neofunctionalism, all acknowledge that the state is the unit of analysis. As Moravscik and Schimmelfennig argue, liberal intergovernmentalism, which they consider to be the "baseline theory of regional integration" seeks to explain bargaining under anarchy (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2009, p. 67). Liberal intergovernmentalism concerns itself with actor preferences and the source of those preferences, the domestic level or the state itself. Mansfield and Solingen also share this logic of preference formation by arguing that states calculate and reach their preferences through "ruling coalitions" within the state. Moravcsik, Mansfield, and Solingen converge on the aspect of "internationalizing" (winning) domestic coalitions to emit their preferences, which serves as the baseline of interstate interaction. The stronger the domestic coalitions are, the better the commitment by member states, which leads to an ideal transfer of sovereignty to international institutions, which in turn would be better representatives of intrinsic interests. Laursen questions how effective regional integration in liberal intergovernmentalism is by stating that there are elements of redistribution and reciprocity expected through the actions and processes of integration.

The defense of neofunctionalism by Rosamond (2005) illuminates the question of whether integration is a process or an outcome. Rosamond, in contextualizing the rationalist approach, emphasizes the procedural components of regional integration found in earlier studies of neofunctionalism (especially Hass, 1971; Hoffmann, 1966), while Nye examines the different forms integration can take, thus referencing outcomes. Rosamond argues that Haas's intent was to see a political community that was at least analogous to the domestic pluralist polity. The distinction between Rosamond's appropriation of Haas and others in the rationalist

approach seems to be fuzzy, as Rosamond also quotes Haas in saying actors can redefine their interests, interests are not materialistic, and that values shape interests. How then does neofunctionalism fit into the rational tradition if interests are not fixed at the domestic level? Rosamond employs a constructivist vocabulary to articulate Haas's "true intention" but it becomes hard to divorce neofunctionalism from the rationalist tradition when Rosamond later states that neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism are "pretty much indistinguishable" (Rosamond, 2005)

A constructivist approach to the study of regions centers the role and construction of identity in regionalism, focusing on ideas and social interactions, rather than on institutions themselves (Acharya, 2012; Checkel, 2005; Duffield, 2007). Emphasizing ideas and social interactions provides pathways into understanding how actors within a regional configuration see each other and how those actors justify their interactions within and beyond the configuration, and conditions the extent to which actors within the configuration possess or have the capacity to acquire agency within and beyond the configuration. Regional identity formation typically refers to the emergence of shared feelings of loyalty, solidarity, and commonality among member states and their citizens therein (Oelsner, 2013). Regional identity formation also shifts away from states as the primary actors in regional configurations and instead allows for an inquiry, for example, into how the preferences of actors such as national elites might actively seek to create and locate regional connectivity and regional identity to tactically mediate the pressures of globalization (Taylor, 2003). Additionally, by constructing regional identities, regional configurations are able to define, redefine, and reinforce political and social values within.

The process of constructing regional identity has become one of the central features of comparative regionalism. Checkel (2016) characterizes the centrality of regional identity construction as the "identity-community-RO nexus" as a method to measure the process of how identity affects community building in regional organizations and how identity shapes the construction of regional organizations. In the identity-community-RO nexus, Checkel highlights how institutions can shape the identity of regional organizations (e.g., ASEAN) and how the building of identity by elites and other actors might shape the composition and ideas of regional organizations (e.g., African Union and the European Union). In this view, identity is central to the institutional design of international organizations, the make-up of its members, and institutional practices.

Ideational values and constructions of regional organizations can also condition responses to contestation within regional configurations. For instance, one can examine the institutional identity of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and its ideational preference toward the principle of democracy and democratic consolidation. Oelsner highlights the exclusion of Paraguay from the initial MERCOSUR negotiations until the fall of the dictatorship of Alfredo Stronesser in 1989 and Paraguay's desire to be a part of a regional community of democratic states, which would in turn allow Paraguay to rely on the bloc to aid in any project that preserves democracy and stabilizes the country (Kaltenthaler & Mora, 2002; Oelsner, 2013). At the same time, MERCOSUR member states also construct an external projection as a cohesive trading bloc able to pit external actors such as the EU and the United States against each other to reduce MERCOSUR's dependence on either external actor, while also gaining recognition as a viable and legitimate regional grouping (Carranza, 2006).

Additionally, in regions such as "Southeast Asia" and the broader "Asia-Pacific," where there are a diversity of actors and interests, ideas like the "ASEAN way" have conditioned the way regional disputes are resolved, serve as part of a distinct decision-making process, and link traditional regional practices of consensus-finding and consultation to a broader process of identity-building (Beeson, 2008; Haacke, 2003). Ba (2009) explores this dynamic further, by highlighting the process of argumentation and debate among ASEAN member states, which ends up clarifying and reinforcing ideas and connections, paying explicit attention to ASEAN's founding arguments and ideas and the process in which they become durable and resilient over time. Ba demonstrates that the search for consensus around political-security and economic arguments in ASEAN's first decade, end up defining the normative obligations of the organization (Ba, 2009, p. 67). By ASEAN states assuming that their relations are inherently fragile, they develop a shared identity and consensus on how to pursue security and how to engage with non-ASEAN states.

While regional identity formation has become a central empirical focus of comparative regionalism, there remain significant variations in how scholars define and measure identity. In some cases, identity is inferred from founding treaties and documents that make implicit or explicit mention of identity formation or ideational values. For example, in the revision of its 1975 founding treaty, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) added "fundamental principles" of the organization that, among other things, explicitly declare that member states recognize each other's equality and interdependence, solidarity and collective self-reliance, and promotion and consolidation of a democratic system of governance.[1] This provision along with subsequent protocols infer that ideational values such as democracy, good governance, and collectivity are central to the regional project in ECOWAS, and ideational values and procedural commitments come to constitute regional identity.[2] Distinctly, in ASEAN, though there is a lack of deeply institutionalized organizational structures, ASEAN members engage in particular "habits of cooperation" that generate and sustain peaceful relations among ASEAN members (Glas, 2017). In this example, Glas uses constructivism and practice theory to analyze diplomatic habits of ASEAN officials to generate an understanding about the process of consensus formation among and between ASEAN members. The empirical focus on habits allows Glas to capture the long term, iterated process of identity formation in ASEAN, while also providing a theoretical template in which to extend this analysis beyond ASEAN.

The construction of regional identity in regionalism is also problematized, as the construction of regional identity can also reveal how identities are disputed within a regional community. Looking at the Andean Community, Prieto (2020) argues that if one disentangles a notion of collective identity, then one can begin to understand how identity is inherently a political and disputed issue, not something that merely binds actors together. Similarly, in West Africa, Mumford (2021) argues that African international actors who are advancing the regional project fall into a "Pan-African Rhetorical Trap," which describes a normative environment in which certain outcomes in the regional project become irresistible because they accord with norms of the African community. In this view, regional identity becomes political because it creates an environment that makes it difficult for detractors to seek alternative regional outcomes and forces convergence on outcomes, which may be suboptimal for some actors.

The constructing of regional identity as a driver of comparative regionalism research has been less concerned with understanding regional integration, and more with how the social, economic, and political space has been reconstructed on a regional basis (Warleigh-Lack & Rosamond, 2010). Empirically, regional identity can be invoked by subjects for legitimating purposes or for strategic reasons (Lenz et al., 2019) or regional identity can be framed as the main driver of integration/cooperation (Lawson, 2016; Lee & Milner, 2014). What explains the emphasis on identity in comparative regionalism research? One explanation might be the focus on European identity formation in EU studies. These arguments within EU studies often focused on the construction of a European identity versus a national identity, and questioning how and when individuals within the EU see themselves as Europeans or when they see themselves as nationals of their own country (Risse & Grabowsky, 2008).

European citizens distinguish between a cultural and historical Europe and a political Europe, and these are conditioned by "European public spheres" where various conceptions of what it means to be European are also bound up in different conceptualizations of the nation-state within the EU. This focus on European identity formation diffuses through comparative regionalism to examine the extent to which these homogenizing discourses and the problematizing of the domestic context are present in other regional groupings. By the EU creating institutional space (public spheres) to foster notions of identity, while also advancing a public discourse around the EU's perceived democratic deficit, identity becomes a key mechanism that helps explain the durability of the EU, even in the face of detractor states such as the United Kingdom.

Another reason identity features prominently in comparative regionalism research stems from the need to normatively distinguish regions due to the legacy of area studies as part of the study of regionalism. As Ahram and colleagues (2018) explain, comparative area studies aims to balance a sensitivity and attention to the "local" context, while generating causal linkages that are portable across world regions. Similarly, Acharya (2011) coins the term "norm subsidiarity," which he defines as the process whereby local actors develop new rules or new understandings of global rules, or re-affirm global rules in a regional context, which also calls scholars to think empirically and historically about the background conditions and sense of community local actors possess. Identity formation offers an entry point to examine how regional organizations translate use and formulate their identity to develop more robust forms of agency, or how their identity might serve to mute or constrain their agency. Methodologically, identity serves as a variable to test and measure across regions and while the constitution of identity is inherently different across regions, comparing or unpacking the processes of constructing identities helps explain variation within and between regions.

Decentering Europe and Regional Agency

A central critique to comparative regionalism scholarship has been the need to overcome the tendency to see Europe as the optimal form of regionalism and for the study of comparative regionalism to transcend Eurocentrism and move toward a non-Western/Eurocentric research agenda (Axline, 1977; De Lombaerde et al., 2010; Fioramonti & Mattheis, 2016). The task of comparative regionalism then, is to overcome European models of regional cooperation and integration, by examining the ways in which the processes of regional governance are uniquely local. This follows similar trends in regionalism literature that advocate for "de-

essentializing" as well as decentering, as to not take Europe and the European experience as a "given" that then conditions the scope of analysis on regionalism through the vantage point of Europe (Muehlenhoff et al., 2020). By decentering the European experience, a scholar would hopefully glean different causal mechanisms that explain variations in institutional design choices, the interplay between state and society, or other mechanisms that tether regional institutional development to the European experience. The move away from Eurocentric regionalism analysis has led to a focus on the agency of Global South regionalisms, which drives comparative regionalism research.[3] This is distinct from a notion of agency rooted in identity in that the purpose and agentic capacity of regional actors is rooted in the desire for autonomy from EU-centered approaches to regionalism (Acharya, 2016). With a focus on regional agency through the prism of non-Europeanism, comparative regionalism is able to address variation between non-Western regionalism and capture the context and conditions of convergence and divergence in Global South regionalisms.

Why agency? One might consider the meta-theoretical question of IR knowledge formation, legitimacy, and the concept of "cognitive empire" that often contextualizes IR theorizing (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Thus, decentering Europe in comparative regionalism research is not only meant to shift the focal point of analysis to a non-Western part of the world, but it is also part of an epistemological move by the scholar to identify and make prominent alternative forms of knowledge. Agency is a mechanism for the scholar and the subject of the research to give voice and center knowledge about the world without Europe as a reference point. From this vantage point, regions, particularly in the Global South, are not sites to merely emulate the institutional designs of their Western counterparts (Risse, 2016), and they are not limited to certain forms of governance by virtue of their statehood. Rather, the focus on agency from the research and as the subject of scholarship seeks to explain away these "constraints" and center the activeness of the actors involved in the regional project.

While it is difficult to measure a scholar's own reflexivity about the normative project to decolonize IR (unless explicitly stated), there are some discernable trends in comparative regionalism literature that explicitly and implicitly focus on agency. One way in which scholars address agency in comparative regionalism is examining the relationship between domestic politics and regional governance. Examining the relationship between domestic politics or domestic political interests and regional governance is often used to counter macroperspectives of comparative regionalism, such as trade liberalization and security. For example, Phillips (2003) examines regionalism in the Southern Cone in Latin America and argues that there is a redefinition of regional governance that moves away from "open regionalism" that centers trade liberalization and an understanding of how regional projects emerge from and reinforce domestic processes, toward paying more attention to how governance structures remain largely informal. The dynamics in the Southern Cone are representative of agency in that each of the member states in the MERCOSUR market bring their own domestic contexts to intra-regional negotiations, resulting in convergence of domestic political economic structures and entrenching divergences between domestic coalitions and political economic structures (Phillips, 2003). Phillips uses the frame of "open regionalism" as a way to decenter a political project that originated in the West, to show how Asian countries and Latin American countries took divergent paths resulting in a reorganization of the regional project in both cases. Similarly, Junior (2020) uses domestic political crises in Paraguay and Venezuela to explain how overlapping regional mechanisms for protecting democracy in the Americas (MERCOSUR, OAS, IADC, and UNASUR), both

represent the enlargement of regionalism in South America and have had unintended consequences and weakened democracy protection and South American regionalism. Agency operates here not as a unidirectional act by the regional actors, but as a mutually constituted relationship between regional actors and their structures.

Similarly, van der Westhuizen (2019) examines the intersection between South Africa's regional obligations and domestic interests, arguing that domestic stakeholders support South Africa in its pursuit of a leadership role on the continent through regionalism, specifically to advance an "African Agenda," yet their international activism is mediated both by a lack of sufficient accountability in the African Renaissance Fund and domestic xenophobic attitudes. Agency in this case is prominent, in that South Africa relies on domestic buy-in to acquire its agency internationally, yet its agency is also constrained by domestic attitudes. Agency is also aspirational, as Penfold and Fourie (2015) demonstrate and argue that though Southern African Development Community is reliant on donors, developmental aid, and other external actors, the broader global health governance theater could benefit from a more activist SADC as a regional health policy actor. The study of agency offers a way to examine the material preferences of regional actors while illustrating the diversity of mechanisms that make regional actors active in their context-specific environment.

Agential approaches to comparative regionalism also offer an opportunity to examine nonconventional actors in the regional project. In particular, there has been increased attention to the role of bureaucratic actors and practitioners within regional groupings. Examining "track-two" policy networks in East Asia and Southeast Asia, Capie uses an agent-centered approach to examine the extent of influence think tanks, international experts, and epistemic communities have over regional norm diffusion. "Track-two" actors, who engage in informal, unofficial contacts on an ad hoc basis or through fully institutionalized regional networks and meetings, work to bring the region together. While Capie finds that unofficial diplomacy may not be as influential as initially understood, he does find that there is evidence to suggest that unofficial diplomacy can lead individuals to rethink their beliefs about cooperation (Capie, 2010). In a similar fashion, Tieku (2012, 2017), and his examination of the African Union, goes beyond merely describing the African Union Commission as a bureaucracy and focuses on the agency of the practitioners. Tieku explicitly uses Eurocentrism as a point of divergence to highlight the emergence of the AU Commission and the actors therein as an independent actor in global governance. Tieku highlights the role AU practitioners had in developing the strategic mission of the AU and the crafting of the AU's response to the end of the Cold War. Similarly, Weinert (2016) explores the effects of people-centered norms on the English School notion of international society, while Glas and Balogun (2020) compare the emergence of a norm of people-centrism in ASEAN and ECOWAS, showing the central role practitioners in each organization had in reorienting the respective organizations toward people-centrism, though the organizations diverge in their outcomes. In each of these cases, the focus on agency intently changes which actors are relevant, looking inward at internal processes and the ways in which new actors are able to assert themselves as actors in the regional project. By looking intently at the habits, practices, and activities of regional practitioners, the outcome of the regional project is less deterministic or reliant on functional explanations, as would be the case with Europe as the focal point, and more on how local contexts and norms are developed and negotiated between the actors involved.

Lastly, and maybe evidently, the project of decentering Europe in comparative regionalism is also born out of a call for more "South–South" comparisons. The call for more South–South comparisons stems from the belief that European theories of integration cannot apply to other world regions where conditions of integration are fundamentally different. Kraphol (2017) sees that comparative regionalism scholarship seeks to provide in-depth empirical knowledge about the Global South, yet many comparative regionalism studies are not comparative, and comparative regionalism scholarship lacks a well-developed toolbox to examine regional integration in the same way as Europe. Acharya and Johnston (2007) also make this claim explicitly, arguing that regionalism in the Global South is not necessarily a failure; rather, regionalism develops and functions differently outside of Europe. However, while framing of comparative regionalism in the Global South as distinctive from European integration provides a basis to help explain variation, it also works to essentialize and homogenize the Global South as a thing singularly distinct from Europe and the West.

One implied assumption of doing "South–South" comparisons is that even if and when there are divergences in the cases, the regions in question often have the shared experience of marginalization in IR. For example, ASEAN and ECOWAS have the shared experience of emerging in a postcolonial context, where intergovernmental regionalism in the Middle East and in Latin America emerge during periods where member states experience economic growth and resource wealth. However, as Coe (2019) points out, this assumption leaves out significant, normative differences across postcolonial, global south regionalisms. Despite this criticism, centering South–South interactions in comparative regionalism demonstrates an alignment of "epistemes" by the Global South for the Global South (Ling & Pinheiro, 2020). South–South comparisons offer an opportunity to generate knowledge and a greater consciousness of political developments outside of the West. South–South cooperation also provides a context in which actors can learn from each other but also find pathways to hold each other accountable based on their own standards, particularly given how susceptible Global South countries are to preferences and dependencies from the Global North (Kim & Lim, 2017).

What are the ways in which South–South comparisons decenter Europe in their analyses? South–South comparisons usually take the form of comparisons of regional projects in Global South regions, such as Latin America and Africa; between intergovernmental organizations in the Global South, such as ASEAN and SADC; or comparisons of regional institutional features such as institutional design; or issue areas such as peace and security, development, or dispute settlements. Other approaches focusing on South–South comparisons critically examine divergences from hegemonic discourses that suggest the emergence of regionalism globally reflects a manifestation of global orders, modeled by the need for developing countries to engage in global market activity (Gamble & Payne, 1996; Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012). Riggirozzi and Grugel (2015) problematize the notion that regionalism in the Global South is part of a governance strategy to counter exogenous shocks and argue that the stakes for countries in the Global South (in this case, Latin America), is much larger. Riggirozzi and Grugel argue that at the core, new strategies of cooperation and solidarity are also part of a broader question of what development is at stake as hegemonic actors and ideas are removed from the picture. As such, South–South cooperation is a way for Global South actors to redefine the scope and purpose of their engagements to diverge from Eurocentric ideas of regional integration.

Section 1. Comparative Regionalism: Methods and Practice

Born out of desires to examine regional configurations beyond Europe, the question of how to empirically compare regions emerges as a central feature of the comparative regionalism agenda. De Lombaerde and colleagues (2010) identified three interrelated problems of comparative regionalism; what we are studying in comparative regionalism, conceptually; what theories should be used in comparative regionalism, and what methods to use to study comparative regionalism—with the argument that the role of comparison is underdeveloped in comparative regionalism. Indeed, comparative regionalism articles are typically case studies of one region. This reflects a tension between theory and method within comparative regionalism, in that the privileging of local, context-specific phenomena have often comes at the cost of generating generalizable theories that are applicable across regions.

In response, some comparative regionalism research has attempted to move beyond a limited understanding of comparison being left to just the "region" itself. For instance, in their comparison of institutional design across regional organizations, Lenz & Marks (2016) find that the direction of institutional change toward supranationalism and backsliding into disintegration is rare. They measure institutional change by developing an additive index that develops a measure to capture when individual member states transfer authority to a collective member state body based on several decision areas: membership accession, suspension, or expulsion; policy-making; drafting the budget; budget compliance; and constitutional reform (Lenz & Marks, 2016, p. 528). While the focus is on intergovernmental organizations, the additive index focuses intently on the rules that bind these organizations to generate comparisons across regionalisms. Similarly, in an analysis of security governance in the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the African Union (AU), Júnior and Luciano (2018) compare the institutionalization of the security institutions in each organization. Their comparison finds that the AU's support of exogenous actors, embedded humanitarian intervention instruments, and democracy protection mechanisms, explain why the AU has a more interventionist disposition than UNASUR.

Because of the focus on understanding and explaining variations across regions, comparative regionalism scholarship often oscillates from small-N case studies to cross-national/regional quantitative studies. Small-N case studies often employ process-tracing as a method to apply to path-dependent explanations. This method is a popular one to examine causality and explain variations in comparative regionalism research because it focuses on the ways early moments and decisions by political actors shape long-term outcomes. Path dependence allows a scholar to bring in the relevant histories that contextualize the peculiarities of regional integration, but also allows the scholar to make broader claims. As Bennett and Elman (2006, p. 252) suggest, path dependence is represented by four elements that scholars of path dependence give attention to: causal possibility, contingency, closure, and constraint. Case studies offer the opportunity to provide the necessary detail to study historically conditioned events, while also clarifying how causal mechanisms operate. One key example of this dynamic in comparative regionalism is Alice Ba's work, *(Re)negotiating East and Southeast Asia* (Ba, 2009). This work makes a path-dependent argument and draws from the founding moments of ASEAN in 1967, in a region with weak domestic structures, external interventions by great powers, and regional rivalries, to make claims about how ideas of ASEAN and "Southeast Asia" were constructed. Further, Ba uses a historically-conditioned account to explain the expansion of regionalism in Southeast Asia and East Asia and the durability of

ASEAN as an institution. Ba's methodological contribution to comparative regionalism comes through her connection to process tracing and case study analysis, blended with the theoretical contribution of constructivist theory and the role of ideation in regionalism. While one might argue that Ba is only looking at ASEAN as a singular case, the case also illuminates how alternative regionalisms can emerge and be subsumed under a broader regional community and regional ideas, evidenced by ASEAN's regional schemes into East Asia (Ba, 2009, p. 242).

Alternatively, comparative regionalism scholarship also engages in what Ribeiro-Hoffmann and others term inter- and transregionalism (Ribeiro-Hoffmann, 2016). This approach examines and identifies existing political arrangements that bridge regions institutionally and socially, and are inclusive of nonstate and/or informal actors. Ribeiro-Hoffmann makes a distinction between EU-centered inter- and transregional arrangements (such as the EU-ASEAN or EU-ASEAN +3 arrangements) and South–South arrangements such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). The method of comparison in these arrangements also tends to focus on institutional design, and brings in rational choice arguments that frame the arrangements (particularly South–South arrangements) as strategic forums to converge on issues of trade and development, or to build solidarity. Methodologically, the overt "comparison" of these forms of regionalism are elusive at best. Some approaches to systematically comparing inter- and transregionalism look specifically at preferential trade areas and other forms of trade liberalization as a measure of regionalism (Baccini, 2019; Barnekow & Kulkarni, 2017; Mansfield & Milner, 1999; Zárate et al., 2018) and draw conclusions that address why countries enter into trade agreements that are not advantageous to their interests. While the scholarship has been able to generate some broad claims and comparisons based on trade preferences, it often relies on the functional narratives that have claimed to limit regionalism literature from the outset.

As Sbragia (2008) correctly highlights, comparative regionalism is ill-defined and ambiguous in its conception. Regionalism and comparative regionalism are often used interchangeably, and the boundaries between the two are indeed permeable. What explains the limitations of comparative regionalism to properly address the "comparison problem?" Two explanations are offered: the first focuses on the conceptual problem of comparative regionalism laid out by De Lombaedre and colleagues. The insistence of asking the foundational question "What are we comparing?" in comparative regionalism has led to a flexibility in determining and defining what regionalism is. Because of this enduring conceptual question, it limits the scope of comparison to testing how well European integration theories travel beyond Europe. While these approaches might yield findings that suggest that theories of liberal intergovernmentalism are limited in their theoretical utility, the methods and approaches used to test such comparisons end up reproducing European centrality. For example, Börzel and Risse (2019) conclude in their examination of grand theories of integration that diffusion approaches help explain similarities in regionalism, particularly in the selective adoption and transformation of European models of integration into localizing contexts. Thus, a comparison of regional integration across regions concludes that the European model still features prominently. Put differently, a key issue to the methodological problem of comparative regionalism is a lack of consensus on the conceptual problem of comparative regionalism.

If, conceptually, all roads lead back to Europe, how can the scholar engage in a study of comparative regionalism without tethering Europe to the comparison? A cross-regional, large-N study of comparative regionalism would undoubtedly have to include variables that privilege the European experience, such as the extent of democratic legitimacy in an institution, membership criteria, or the extent to which countries involved in free trade areas or preferential trade agreements are in such arrangements for instrumental purposes. Take, for example, the Comparative Regional Organizations Project (CROP), which measures the "normative dimensions" in RO agreements as "liberal, Westphalian, and sustainability"; questions the "contagiousness" and diffusion effects of regional organization; and also characterizes the presence of "EU Commission-type institutions" where the "necessary conditions of integration are absent."[4] These frameworks limit the scope of developing an inclusive range of comparison, since the basis of comparison is rooted in a singular, normative idea of what regionalism should look like.

The second problem of comparison comes from the methodological "toolbox" in comparative regionalism. Because comparative regionalism finds its origins in three distinctive fields (IR, comparative politics, and area studies), scholars approach the study of comparative regionalism with a diverse methodological skill set. For those who are inclined to use an IR lens to look at comparative regionalism, the scope of the analysis might be on power dynamics within a particular regional arrangement or the role of powerful states in regional configurations. Conversely, those inclined to use comparative politics as their analytical lens might focus on the most similar or most different institutional designs or the role of historical institutionalism in regionalist projects. Parthenay (2019) also argues that there is a tendency in comparative regionalism scholarship to highlight the limitations of collecting data on regional organizations. Whereas comparative regionalism emerges to bridge disciplinary divides, in practice, the task of operationalizing and defining what regions are and how to compare the substance of regionalism often finds the scholar trying to maneuver disciplinary constraints and theories in their methodological approach.

To achieve the essence and promise of comparative regionalism, scholars must be equipped with a breadth of methodological tools that expand the boundaries of disciplines, but also comparative regionalism ought to open up to allow for post-positivist and interpretivist methodologies to account for the complexities of comparing regions. For instance, as Parthenay (2019) shows, one of the main limitations to studying regional organizations is access and transparency to regional organizations and the individuals therein. An interpretivist approach would consider how the research works to establish relationships with individuals in the organization and the extent to which one's position as a researcher might lead to a specific interpretation of regional phenomena (Soedirgo & Glas, 2020). For instance, as a researcher, if one is going in to look for diffusion effects or imported institutional features of the EU in ASEAN, the analysis is then focused only on those instances where the author determines diffusion is occurring. Therefore, the African Union Commission reflects an "EU-Commission type" institution for the researcher who is not reflexive, rather than an institution that is reflective of its own distinct bureaucratic and diplomatic culture.

Alternatively, it might be helpful to consider the method of studying comparative regionalism not as something that should follow a single methodological framework and instead consider embracing the methodological pluralism of comparative regionalism research. Perhaps it is a strength of comparative regionalism research that there are multiple methods and standards that are a part of the comparative regionalism research agenda. For instance, a single case

analysis of MERCOSUR that teases out the elements of intergovernmentalism that conditions the organization's institutional development informs later studies that explain why presidentialism in MERCOSUR explains variation in its institutional design vis-à-vis the EU (Caichiolo, 2016; Malamud, 2003). Method matters less than the ability to generate knowledge about seemingly disparate regionalisms. By the substance of comparative regionalism, the field lends itself to both "thick" and "thin" approaches of comparison. The broader question then, is if there needs to be a comprehensive set of standards to "compare" regions, similar to how comparative politics scholars develop a range of standards to compare democracies or the process of democratization (Coppedge, 2012). Determining what is truly "comparative" about comparative regionalism will endure, though an embrace of multiple methodological tools, including interpretive research methods, would substantially broaden understanding of how to conduct the study of comparative regionalism.

Conclusion

Has comparative regionalism's time come? Acharya's question of almost 10 years ago is still inconclusive. In one regard, the increased amount of scholarship on regionalism in the Global South, an increase in understandings of the mechanisms that drive certain regional configurations, and a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the EU and its relationship with other regions have improved the scholarship of comparative regionalism scholarship in IR. In another regard, one might question how prominent comparative regionalism scholarship is in IR as a discipline. Additionally, Brexit potentially signifies a shift back to the cost-benefit analysis of regionalism or potentially alters what were once strong, empirically backed theories about the relationship between market-led regionalism, supranationalism, and globalization.

The article addresses how regional identity formation, the decentering of Europe, and the question of comparison still drives most comparative regionalism research. These features of comparative regionalism research have led scholars to create knowledge about how regional institutions matter in global governance, have enabled scholars to conceptualize regions as their own autonomous spaces for governance, and have broadened the knowledge base of non-European regional configurations. Despite these advances in comparative regionalism literature, there are still challenges the field must contend with. One challenge is the need to broaden the methodological tool kit that scholars use to "do" comparative regionalism research. Incorporating reflexivity and interpretative research methods into the comparative regionalism research agenda offers scholars another opportunity to examine the microprocesses of regional cooperation and the interactions between how individuals experience the structure and agency of regional institutions. Another challenge is to truly reckon with Eurocentrism in the field. Mumford (2020) offers some valuable recommendations to do this work, including generating research questions about regional communities from problems as the community conceives of them, which necessitates an active and continuous engagement between regionalism scholars and the regional communities they study. This requires scholars to think about their assumptions and starting points in their research inquiry. What would it take for the scholar to generate a theory about regional agency without tethering agency to a notion of erasure or contingency to Europe or the West?

What would a theory of institutional design look like without centering the model of institutionalization in the EU? These are the kinds of questions that scholars should take up if they are to begin the work of decentering Europe in comparative regionalism.

These suggestions are not exhaustive and, indeed, more can and should be done to fully address whether comparative regionalism is a field whose time has come. Nonetheless, comparative regionalism remains a promising and evolving field of study in IR, with the potential to truly encompass the promise of "Global IR," while also possessing the potential to critically engage with and center perspectives at the boundaries of the field.

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Notes

1. ECOWAS 1993 Revised Treaty, Article 4 (a–k).

2. Thank you to the reviewers for acknowledging and emphasizing this observation.

3. Agency is defined here as the purposive capacity of regional actors to (re)act, engage with, ignore, speak, or remain silent in international spaces (Chabal et al., 2007; Hurt, 2003; Patterson & Balogun, 2021).

4. For information on the CROP project, see _<https://comparativeregionalorganizations.org/>_.

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