

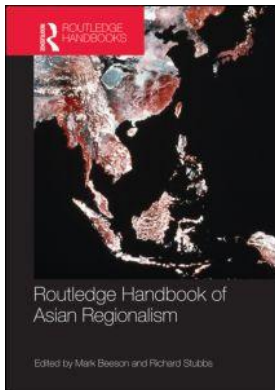
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### **Theories of Regionalism**

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## Part I

# Conceptualizing the Asian region

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# Theories of regionalism

*Fredrik Söderbaum*

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## Introduction

This handbook underlines the multidimensionality and pluralism of contemporary regionalism<sup>1</sup>. As a discipline, regionalism has become a research field in itself, rather than being limited to a more narrow state- or policy-driven process conceptualized in terms of ‘regional integration’ in the traditional sense. This has given rise to a number of new puzzles and challenges for both academics and policymakers, with a subsequent proliferation of a very large number of theories and concepts. A single chapter such as this cannot do justice to the diverse theoretical landscape. The goal of this chapter is, therefore, limited to giving an overview of some of the key theoretical debates and controversies that are particularly relevant for the study of Asian regionalism. More specifically, it will relate Asian regionalism to the historical development of the field in general, and to the overemphasis on European integration theory and practice in the field, as well as considering the crucial relationship between formal and informal regionalism. The study builds upon the understanding that it is not relevant to develop a theory about Asian regionalism *per se*. Rather, it is of specific interest to situate it within a more general theoretical and comparative discussion. It will be assumed, however, that Asia is crucial to the further development of the field.

The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first provides an overview of the early and more recent debates and theories; the second addresses the problem of Eurocentrism in theory-building and its implication for the study of Asian regionalism; the third gives an overview of theoretical perspectives on formal and informal regionalism; and the fourth outlines more specifically the discussion about formality and informality in Asia and the implication for comparative regionalism.

## Early and recent debates on regionalism

The early debate covers research undertaken between the 1950s and 1970s: the relevant theories were federalism, functionalism and neofunctionalism (Rosamond 2000; Hettne and Söderbaum 2008). Federalism, which inspired the pioneers of European integration, was more a political programme than a theory – it was sceptical of the nation state, although what was to be created was rather a new kind of state. Functionalism was also an approach to peace-building rather than a

theory. In contrast to federalism, it was primarily associated with one particular scholar, David Mitrany (1966), and the burning question was on which political level various human needs (often defined in a technical way) could best be met – claiming the best way was to go beyond the nation state but not necessarily to go ‘regional’.

Neofunctionalism became the most influential approach during the early debate. It combined the method of functionalism with the ultimate objective of federalism. Ernst Haas (1958) was the central theorist, who put forward the ‘community method’ of Jean Monnet. Although the outcome of this method could be a federation, it was not built by constitutional design – i.e. form would follow function. The basic mechanism was ‘spillover’, the key concept defined as ‘the way in which the creation and deepening of integration in one economic sector would create pressures for further economic integration within and beyond that sector, and greater authoritative capacity at the European level’ (Rosamond 2000: 60; cf. Haas 1958). Bela Balassa (1961a) applied a similar logic to economic integration. A free trade area would lead to a customs union and further to the establishment of a common market, economic union and political union. Other leading authors who wrote about early regionalism include Karl Deutsch (1957), Joseph Nye (1971), and Philippe Schmitter (1970).

At the time of these debates, European integration theories were developed for and from the European experience and then more or less reapplied or exported around the world. Although the neofunctionalists were somewhat conscious of their own Eurocentrism, in their comparative analyses they searched particularly for those ‘background conditions’ and ‘spill-over’ effects that could be found in Europe (Haas 1961; Hettne 2003). All too often (but not always) the European Community (EC) was seen and advocated as *the* model, and other looser and informal modes of regionalism were, wherever they appeared, characterized as ‘weaker’ or ‘failed’ (i.e. with no ‘regional integration’ according to the dominating definition).

In the 1960s the fit between the neofunctional description (and prescription) and the empirical world, dominated by de Gaulle’s nationalism, disappeared. Stanley Hoffman (1966) challenged the (neo)functionalist prescription that integration would spread from low politics (economics) to the sphere of high politics (security). The image of the EC began to diverge. According to the intergovernmentalist turn in the study of European integration, regional integration happened only as long as it coincided with the national interest – as a ‘rescue of the nation-state’ (Milward 1992). The ontological shift thus meant an epistemological shift towards a more state-centric, realist analysis. Puchala (1971) famously used the fable of the elephant and the blind men to underline the fact that different observers highlighted different aspects of the same broader phenomenon. He stressed the need for reconceptualization based on empirical observation, and preferred to see the EC as a concordant system.

The 1970s was a period of ‘Eurosclerosis’ within the EC, but the 1985 White Paper on the internal market and the Single European Act (SEA) resulted in a new dynamic process of European integration. This was also the start of what has often been referred to as ‘new regionalism’ on a global scale. To some observers, regionalism was ‘new’ mainly in the sense that it represented a revival of protectionism or neo-mercantilism. However, most observers highlighted the fact that the closure of regions was not on the agenda. Indeed, the recent debate is to a large extent generated by the transformation of the Westphalian nation state, the erosion of national borders and the pressing question of how to navigate politically in the context of globalization (Söderbaum and Shaw 2003; Cooper *et al.* 2008).

Regionalism needs to be understood both from an exogenous perspective (outside-in) and an endogenous perspective (inside-out) (Hettne 2002; also see Neumann 2003). The former perspective refers to the fact that regionalization and globalization are intertwined articulations of global transformation, whereas the latter implies that regionalization is shaped from within the

region by a large number of different factors. Even if neorealist scholarship emphasizes systemic variables, the exogenous perspective has developed primarily in the course of the recent debate and the intensification of globalization, which also explains why scholars such as Hettne referred to it as ‘new regionalism’ (i.e. in order to distinguish earlier from more recent processes). The endogenous perspective finds much more continuity with functionalist and neofunctionalist theorizing about regional integration, the role of agency and the long-term transformation of territorial identities. As a result, endogenous theories usually do not rely on (or acknowledge) distinctions about old and new regionalism. Yet it is quite obvious that in contrast to the time when Haas, Deutsch and the early regional integration scholars were writing, today’s scholars identify many regionalisms. This in turn provides a very different base for theorizing regionalism. It is apparent that neither the object of study (ontology) nor the way of studying it (epistemology) has remained static. Indeed, current regionalization may be seen as a new political landscape in the making, characterized by an expanding cast of actors (state and non-state) operating in the regional arena and across several interrelated dimensions: security, development, trade, environment, identity and so on.

The multidimensionality and pluralism of the regional phenomenon, both in Europe and the rest of the world, has resulted in the proliferation of a large number of revitalized or (partly) ‘new’ theories and approaches to regionalism. There has been an explosion during the last decade of theoretical explorations in the field. Some edited volumes including Söderbaum and Shaw’s (2003) collection, *Theories of New Regionalism*, draw attention to variants of institutionalism, security complex theory, and a variety of constructivist, critical and ‘new regionalism’ approaches, such as the world order approach (WOA), new regionalism approach (NRA) and region-building approach. Mansfield and Milner’s (1997) *The Political Economy of Regionalism* highlights a variety of neorealist and neo-liberal institutional theories, new trade theories and new institutionalism. Laursen’s two separate volumes on comparative regional integration (2003, 2010) emphasize a variety of governmentalist, power, constructivist, neofunctionalist and historical institutionalist perspectives, whereas Wiener and Diez (2009) is a coherent and stimulating exposé of the richness of European integration theory, highlighting federalism, neofunctionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, multilevel governance, policy networks, new institutionalisms, social constructivism, integration through law, discursive approaches and gender perspectives. With regard to theoretical innovation, it is also important to stress the leading role played by scholars such as Amitav Acharya (2001) and Peter Katzenstein (2005). Their work has been groundbreaking not only for understanding regionalism in Asia but also for comparative regionalism. It is clear that since the late 1990s (after the slow start of the recent debate that was dominated by single or parallel case studies), comparative analysis has now become one of the most important trends in the contemporary study of regionalism (also cf Mattli 1999; Breslin and Higgott 2000; Rosamond 2000; Farrell *et al.* 2005; Acharya and Johnston 2007; Warleigh-Lack and van Langenhove 2010; van Langenhove 2011; Warleigh-Lack *et al.* 2011).

There has been intense debate (and much confusion) about what is ‘old’ and ‘new’ in the study of regionalism (see Söderbaum 2003, 2004). One prominent scholar of the recent debate, Björn Hettne, who is very much associated with the label in the first place, forcefully states that after more than two decades of the so-called ‘new regionalism’, the distinction has lost much of its original meaning and that it is time to bury it (or at least move beyond it) (Hettne 2003, 2005). However, having made this point, Hettne states that it may still be relevant to identify continuities and discontinuities.

One change in thinking is related to the conceptualization and understanding of ‘region.’ During the early debate about regional integration a large amount of research capacity was invested in trying to define regions scientifically (Cantori and Spiegel 1970) and a plethora of

opinions were advanced regarding what mutual interdependencies mattered the most, such as economic, political and social variables, or historical, cultural and ethnic bonds. The results of this research were not compelling, and parsimonious attempts to define regions have basically come to an end. Most scholars engaged in the contemporary debate agree that there are no natural or 'scientific' regions, and that these definitions vary according to the particular problem or question under investigation. Many scholars solve the problem by concentrating on regional organizations and regional economic frameworks (Fawcett and Hurrell 1995; Acharya and Johnston 2007), or security complexes/communities (Adler and Barnett 1998; Buzan and Waever 2003).

Yet there is a difference between mainstream (rationalist and 'problem-solving') and critical and constructivist scholarship regarding the conceptualization and treatment of regions. Mainstream (early) theorists usually take regions as pre-given, and often define them as particular interstate or policy-driven frameworks. Integral to this reasoning is that regions are believed to be identifiable through material structures and formal regional organizations. The argument that regions are not best understood in terms of regional intergovernmental organizations has been stressed in recent constructivist and post-structuralist scholarship. From this perspective, all regions are deemed to be socially constructed and hence politically contested. Emphasis is placed upon how political actors perceive and interpret the idea of a region, notions of 'regionness' and region-building (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000; van Langenhove 2011). According to these lines of thought, there are no 'natural' regions; all regions are (at least potentially) heterogeneous with unclear territorial margins.

Since the 1990s, research has also started to place greater emphasis on 'soft', *de facto* or informal regionalization, acknowledging the fact that a range of transnational (non-state) actors have begun to operate at the regional level, within as well as beyond state-led institutional frameworks. For instance, business interests and multinationals are not only operative in the global sphere, but they also tend to create regionalized patterns of economic activity. Oft-cited examples include the regional production systems in East and Southeast Asia and the informal market exchanges in Africa. Similarly, civil society is often neglected in the study of regionalism, despite the fact that its impact is increasing, as it becomes evident in the transnational activist networks and processes of interaction in civil society emerging at the regional level around the world, including Asia (Armstrong *et al.* 2010).

### The problem of Eurocentrism

The study of regionalism has been dominated by European integration theory and practice. Eurocentrism still prevails in large parts of the theoretical and comparative discussion on comparative regionalism – even if it has increasingly been challenged hand in hand with the acknowledgement that regional integration and regionalism may appear in many guises. One problem from a comparative perspective is that regionalism in Europe is often, according to the Europe-centred view, considered multidimensional and highly institutionalized – both a descriptive and prescriptive contention – whereas regionalism/regional integration in the rest of the world is seen as only weakly institutionalized and reduced to either an economic or security-related phenomenon. Even if there are some good reasons why these notions developed in the first place, such generalizations tend to be problematic (Söderbaum 2009; Söderbaum and Sbragia 2010; Warleigh-Lack and van Langenhove 2010; Warleigh-Lack *et al.* 2011).

The uneasy relationship between EU studies and comparative regionalism is confirmed by two renowned scholars of European integration, Alex Warleigh-Lack and Ben Rosamond (2010), who argue that in much of recent European Union (EU) studies scholars have considered the EU as a nascent, if unconventional, polity in its own right ('the famous N = 1 problem'), exploring

issues such as Europeanization and the EU's own political system. This perspective has generated useful insights, but as Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond assert, it has also carried a certain intellectual parochialism and thereby kept us from deepening our understanding of the EU as a political system. Further, it has ironically also reinforced the notion that the EU is *sui generis*, thereby downplaying the respects in which the EU resembles either federal nation states or other regionalist projects around the world, even if recent work on the EU also includes explicit comparisons with federal systems in advanced industrial states, with the United States playing a prominent role in such comparisons (Fabbrini 2007).

Few can dispute that the EU as a region is diverse and, as a result, there has been an explosion of interesting theorizing on European integration. Hence, there is no consensus in a single EU mode of governance but a series of different interpretations of the EU (see Wiener and Diez 2009). This diversity ought, at least potentially, to have a positive influence on the broader regionalism literature.

It is evident that European integration theory and practice affects the study of regionalism in all corners of the world, including Asia. Somewhat simplified, it is possible to identify two broad attitudes towards European integration theory and practice in the field of regionalism. One strand of thinking tends to elevate European integration, while the other is considerably less convinced of the advantages of Eurocentric theories and generalizations. These two perspectives are similar, regardless of whether we talk about Asian, African or Latin American regionalism. Neither of these attitudes is fruitful for the development of theories of regionalism. The first perspective – think for instance of realist or intergovernmental and liberal or institutionalist approaches – is dominated by a concern to explain deviations from the ‘standard’ European case. From this perspective, other modes of regionalism/regional integration are normally characterized as loose and informal (Asia) or as failed (Africa), reflecting ‘a teleological prejudice informed by the assumption that “progress” in regional organisation is defined in terms of EU-style institutionalisation’ (Breslin *et al.* 2002: 11). Many comparisons and generalizations, which depart from the European context and the European welfare state, are skewed through a lack of sensitivity to comparing regions that occupy unequal positions in the current world order and consisting of radically different state forms. A related problem with such Eurocentric bias lies in the ways the underlying assumptions and understandings about the nature of regionalism in Europe condition perceptions about how regionalism in other parts of the world does (and should) look. Too many prescriptions result from a *particular* reading of European integration, which places heavy emphasis on the economic and political trajectory of the EC/EU. Indeed, as Hurrell asserts, ‘the study of comparative regionalism has been hindered by so-called theories of regionalism which turn out to be little more than the translation of a particular set of European experiences into a more abstract theoretical language’ (Hurrell 2005: 39).

Whereas the mainstream literature on regionalism has favoured generalizations from the case of the EU in its theory-building efforts, the tendency has been the reverse in large parts of the so-called ‘new regionalism’ literature within international relations, especially the radical and postmodern variants. Many of these scholars have tried to avoid and challenge Eurocentrism, and numerous innovative and rather successful attempts to develop a regional approach specifically aimed at the developing world have evolved from this work (Axline 1994; Bøås *et al.* 2005). On the one hand, there are good reasons for taking stock of this cumulative research on non-European regions and for being cautious regarding EU-style institutionalization dominating in mainstream perspectives. On the other hand, however, large parts of this scholarship tend to mirror the Eurocentric view by taking the EU more or less as an ‘anti-model’ and by celebrating the differences in theory and practice between regionalism in Europe and in the developing world. Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond (2010) argue that the critical regionalism scholars in

international relations (IR) have not engaged with EU studies theories and sometimes even have made a caricature of the EU and/or of orthodox integration theory (presumably because of the exaggeration of differences between earlier and more recent forms of regionalism). This has, in turn, resulted in a failure to learn from both successes and shortcomings of European integration theory, giving rise to unnecessary fragmentation within the research field (also see Warleigh-Lack and van Langenhove 2010; Warleigh-Lack *et al.* 2011).

Some of the most intriguing studies in the field of regionalism are case studies or studies situated in debates within a particular region. Case study has often been the preferred methodological approach in Asian regionalism. Detailed case studies are certainly necessary; they identify historical and contextual specificities and allow for a detailed and intensive analysis of a single case (according to mono-, multi- or interdisciplinary studies). Many of these studies connect to general theoretical debates. Still, we cannot aim for a theory of Asian regionalism in itself. The next step in the study of regionalism is to develop its comparative element, which will be crucial for enhancing cross-fertilization between various theoretical standpoints and regional specializations (Söderbaum 2009; de Lombaerde *et al.* 2010).

### *Theoretical perspectives on formal and informal regionalism<sup>2</sup>*

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, regions have been defined in advance of research, and have often been seen as particular interstate or policy-driven frameworks.

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 organizations. Neofunctionalism emphasizes 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).

Institutionalism, in its various guises, has perhaps become the contemporary form of functionalism and neofunctionalism. One of the dominating approaches of new institutionalism – neo-liberal institutionalism – is based on a number of core arguments (Keohane 1984; Mansfield and Milner 1997). In common with their neorealist comrades, neo-liberal 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). This implies that state behaviour is constrained and affected by variations in the degree of institutionalization across different issue areas of international and regional politics.

Probably the best comparative study on institutional design is Acharya and Johnston's book (2007). They ask why different forms of institutionalization develop in different regions, and whether variation in institutional design leads to variation in the nature of cooperation; hence institutional design is analyzed both as a dependent and an independent variable (Acharya and Johnston 2007: 2, 15). Acharya and Johnston's study extends beyond the rationalist (and neo-functional) approach to institutional design in order to engage constructivist and other approaches. It covers formal/informal rules, identity as well as norms (the latter are understood as the formal as well as informal ideology of the institution). In this way, Acharya and Johnston's



approach is able to account for the so-called ‘ASEAN Way’, which is based on informality, flexibility, consensus and non-confrontation (Acharya and Johnston 2007: 245). The ASEAN Way will be discussed further in the next section.

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: 51–53).

In response to critique, coming mainly from liberal institutionalism, that the evolution of cooperation is not adequately explained, neorealists and their intergovernmentalist comrades have argued for the continued relevance of state/national interests, power and sovereignty. Although the EU is seen as an interesting polity, they argue that it is shaped by more or less the same intergovernmental politics and bargaining that has determined it from the start. ‘There is nothing particularly special about it, other than that it has taken a highly institutionalised form in Western Europe since the 1950s’ (Cini 2003: 95). According to this view, the EU has developed and become institutionalized in order to protect national interests. It is also argued that the bargains and supranational laws of the EU reflect the interests of the most powerful states, whereas weak states ‘bandwagon’ or are kept in through side-payments (Christiansen *et al.* 2001: 200). Many similar arguments have been raised regarding the logic of regional cooperation in other regions, including Asia.

Barry Buzan (1983) challenged 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’ (Buzan 1991: 190) – had a profound and positive impact on the research field in the 1980s and 1990s. Even if Buzan’s early perspective had state-centric origins, it can hardly be accused of being formalistic. Buzan’s security complexes were seen as ‘miniature anarchies’, and he shared the conventional neorealist conviction that strong states form 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 are an example of the latter, creating 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 a particular constructivist approach, 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 securitization, desecuritization, or both, are so interlinked that their security problems cannot be reasonably analyzed apart from one another’ (Buzan and Waever 2003: 44). Buzan argues that the constructivist approach is necessary in order to keep the concept of security coherent, while adding ‘new security sectors’ – economic, environmental keep and societal – in addition to traditional military and political sectors. 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 organizations, is particularly emphasized in other types of constructivist and post-structuralist scholarship. As Jessop points out, ‘rather than seek an elusive objective ... criterion for defining a region, one

should treat regions as emergent, socially constituted phenomena' (Jessop 2003: 183). 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 (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000; Söderbaum 2004). In this kind of analysis, regional inter-state organizations are seen as a second-order phenomenon, compared to the processes that underlie regionalization 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 regionalization 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 to some extent from students of Asian regionalism. The social constructivist approach in the European debate emphasizes the constitutive function 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' (Checkel 2007: 243).

This theoretical review shows that the discourse on formal-informal regionalism is both expanding and vibrant. However, new definitions of formality-informality compete with old definitions, resulting in a large number of overlapping and sometimes competing attempts to capture similar (but not always identical) phenomena, such as: top-down versus bottom-up regionalism; *de jure* versus *de facto* regionalization; state-led regionalism versus market- and society-induced regionalization; hard versus soft regionalism; and official versus unofficial/informal regionalism. Even if individual researchers often apply coherent definitions, the literature as a whole is somewhat incoherent, leading to a lack of cumulative knowledge.

One of the problems is the tendency to treat the formal and the informal in an almost metaphorical manner, without really defining the two phenomena. There is also a certain tendency to employ binary and dichotomic definitions, which may hide the close relationship between the formal and the informal. In this context, it must be stated that scholars of Asian regionalism are usually more advanced than scholars of other regions in the conceptualization of the formal and the informal. The former often refers to 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 (Weissman 2009). There is also an expanding debate about formal and informal in both European and African integration. One of the major weaknesses is that there is little debate and cross-fertilization between the different regional debates.

The binary treatment of the formal and the informal is rather closely related to the categorization of state and non-state actors into different spheres. Frequently, regionalism is defined as a state-led *project*, and regionalization as a (non-state) societal *process* (see Gamble and Payne 1996, 2003; Hurrell 2005). This has led several scholars to describe the regional phenomenon in terms of

regionalism *versus* regionalization (conceived in terms of state versus non-state actors). However, this conceptualization is inconsistent since it tends to exclude non-state actors of political agency. As Bøås, Marchand and Shaw point out, ‘regionalism is clearly a political project, but it is obviously not necessarily *state-led*, as states are not the only political actor around ... within each regional project (official or not), several competing regionalizing actors with different regional visions and ideas coexist’ (Bøås *et al.* 2003: 201). It is therefore more consistent to define regionalism as the *policy and project or the cognitive idea of forming regions*, and ‘regionalization’ as the *process* of cooperation, integration, cohesion and identity creating a regional space (issue-specific or general). Both regionalism and regionalization may involve state as well as non-state actors. Theories of regionalism need to better accommodate the fact that processes of regionalization can be both formal and informal, but operating in different mixes and causal relationships.

### Formality and informality in Asia and comparative regionalism

There exists no overall consensus for a definition of the Asian region. The meaning of regionalism has changed in relation to the question of what subregions should be included and excluded, and what dimensions of regionalism should be investigated (such as security, economics, politics and identity). This diversity reveals the difficulty in taking the region as ‘given’ as well as the limitations of focusing on one particular regional scale or regional organization.

Still, a considerable body of literature on Asian regionalism focuses on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). A major reason for this emphasis, at least historically, appears to be that ASEAN has been one of the few sustainable regional organizations in the larger Asian zone. To some extent this appears to reflect the preference in the field to focus on state-led regional organizations instead of broader processes of regionalization and region formation. During the Cold War, the core of ASEAN cooperation was in its joint effort to consolidate the member 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 towards achieving increased economic development and ensuring security in a new context.

During recent decades, an important part of the debate about regionalism in (East) Asia has focused on collective identity formation and informal, or ‘soft’, regionalism (Acharya 2001; Katzenstein 2005). The primary concern of this scholarship is the relationship between formality and informality (largely within regional organizations), 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. Scholars are intrigued by the fact that 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 Plus Three (China, Japan and the Republic of Korea). 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 to European-style (and North American) formal bureaucratic structures and legalistic decision-making procedures, is built around discretion, informality, pragmatism, consensus-building and non-confrontational bargaining styles (Acharya 1997: 329). According to Acharya and Johnston:

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 2007: 246)

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: 27–28). This means that there is a considerable emphasis on cultural factors in explaining the ASEAN Way and its differences from Europe.

The question arises whether the strong informal nature of (East/Southeast) Asian regionalism is having an impact on the broader comparative discussion on regionalism (including the study of European integration). As indicated earlier, the comparative discussion in the research field is rather underdeveloped. There are many studies that explicitly or implicitly compare Asian regionalism with European integration, and many of these characterize East Asian regionalism as looser and more informal, sometimes even as ‘underdeveloped’ (Choi and Caporaso 2002: 485). It is problematic, however, to consider EU-style institutionalization 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 Fort and Webber (2006). Amitav Acharya (2006: 312–313) argues that rather than elevating the European model over the Asian experience as a preferred model of regionalism, it is more productive to recognize that regional cooperation is a difficult and contested process that will throw up different, equally legitimate, outcomes. Indeed, as Acharya and Johnston point out, ‘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 2007: 268–269). A similar pattern has been identified in China, where informal processes have been of crucial importance for moving relations towards a stable peace by transforming perceptions, interests and identities (Weissmann 2009, 2010). Acharya and Johnston’s important conclusion is that ‘greater formality [e.g., a shift from consensus to majority voting] may actually affect cooperation negatively’ (Acharya and Johnston 2007: 270).

Although informal regionalism is not totally absent in EU studies and in studies of regionalism in other parts of the globe, the intense link between formal and informal regionalism/regionalization is one important contribution of the Asian case to comparative and European regionalism. The Asian case clearly demonstrates that one can, for instance, speak of relevant and truly regional dynamics and patterns that are not *per se* mirrored by formal regional efforts. The case of Asia furthermore highlights that it is important not only to look at the informality underpinning/accompanying formal regional projects, but also to take a broader perspective on formal-informal aspects of regionalism/regionalization.

In other words, there is room for a more mutually reinforcing cross-fertilization in the study of European and Asian, as well as other forms of regionalisms. There is, for instance, no reason to believe that ‘soft institutionalism’ is a unique Asian phenomenon. Further, comparisons should not be limited to contemporary Asia and Europe, but should benefit from experience across various time periods and in other regions as well. Although there is a rich literature on informal and formal regionalism in Africa, there is no genuine cross-fertilization between the two specialisms (Söderbaum 2004). There is a need to explore to what extent scholars are using parochial concepts for similar phenomena.

## Conclusion

Over the last decade, regionalism has become an academic growth industry in a number of social-science disciplines and sub-disciplines: European studies, comparative politics, international economics, geography, international relations, security studies, and international political economy. The approach of these different academic specializations varies considerably, which means that regionalism means different things to different people. At the same time, there are an increasing number of theories of regionalism. Yet, there is fragmentation and a lack of communication between scholars from various theoretical standpoints as well as from different regional specializations (even within the specific field of Asian regionalism). The tensions and differences illustrate the fact that the regional phenomenon is multidimensional, which seems to imply that there is need for a certain degree of analytical and theoretical eclecticism but also greater conceptual clarity (de Lombaerde *et al.* 2010).

There is a long tradition in the research field of comparative regionalism to focus on formal regional organizations and institutions. This follows from the dominance of rationalist and problem-solving theoretical perspectives, which privilege state-centric perspectives and more or less predefined regions/regional organizations. The increased emphasis on constructivist and reflectivist theorizing since the late 1990s has led to more pluralistic and heterogeneous theories and conceptualizations of regions. As a result, there has been a stronger focus on soft, informal regionalism, as well as an intensified debate regarding the various ways in which state, market and civil-society actors relate and come together in different ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ patterns of regionalism and regionalization. Scholars of Asian regionalism have made an important contribution to the comparative debate on regionalism more generally. The vibrant discussion around formal and informal regionalism in Asia is certainly positive. However, what is needed in the future is an even more intense comparative discussion with other regions.

Thus, the use of comparison is underdeveloped in the field of regionalism, primarily because many scholars specialize in a particular region. As a result, conceptual toolboxes and theories are developed from/for their ‘own’ region. This can result in a parochialism, which may prevent scholars from recognizing that they are often talking about similar or even the same phenomena but using at least partly parochial conceptualizations. Thus, one of the conclusions of this chapter is that there is considerable scope for increased cross-fertilization between different regional debates (also 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. As pointed out earlier, the Asian experience suggests that greater formality may lead to more *inefficient* regional cooperation. Consequently, and to allow for more systematic research, the extent to which this holds true throughout as well as beyond Asia ought to be further investigated.

## Notes

- 1 Several arguments in this chapter have been developed through collaboration (and co-written texts) with Björn Hettne during the last decade. All limitations remain my own.
- 2 This section builds on arguments developed in previous texts, especially Söderbaum (2011).