

Theorizing Latin American Regionalism in the 21st Century

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DOI: <u>10.25518/1374-3864.1644</u> **Résumé :**

Cet article succinct s'inspire des développements récents du régionalisme latino-américain au 21^{ème} siècle et la production académique qui en découle. Il entend réfléchir aux aspects méthodologiques de cette littérature contemporaine et explorer des pistes qui pourraient guider les recherches futures dans ce domaine. Nous y arguons que (i) le débat sur le régionalisme latino-américain pourrait être mieux connecté aux débats sur le futur des RI ; (ii) qu'il est nécessaire d'adopter une approche pragmatique et nuancée s'agissant de la comparabilité de l'Amérique latine et de l'Union européenne ; et (III) que les très riches matériaux empiriques générés (ou qui pourraient être générés) par les régionalismes latino-américains est sous-utilisé par les travaux destinés à la large communauté de régionalistes-comparatistes.

Abstract :

This short article takes the new developments in Latin American regionalism in the 21st century and the academic production which is derived from them as a starting point. The article reflects on some methodological aspects of this recent literature and explores possible pathways that could guide the research agenda in this area. It is argued that (i) the debate on Latin American regionalism could be better connected to the debates on the future of IR, (ii) a pragmatic and nuanced approach is needed with respect to the comparability of cases and to the location of Latin America and the EU in comparative regionalism, and (iii) the rich empirical material that is generated (or could be generated) by Latin American regionalisms is underutilized in analytical work that speaks to the global community of comparative regionalists.

Introduction

Hand-in-hand with the new developments in Latin American politics over the last 15 years, Latin American regionalism has also been and is being re-shaped, and seems to be in search of a new stable equilibrium1. The new regional dynamics were at some point perceived as being paradigm-shifting and requiring a new ontological and/or theoretical framework for its analysis and understanding. A number of academic publications have emerged over the last couple of years, trying to offer new concepts, *ex post* rationalizations of recent developments, and/or new understandings/evaluations of integration models. New labels have thereby been proposed to capture the (changing) nature of Latin American regionalism: post-liberal2, post-neo-liberal, post-hegemonic3, post-trade4, or social.5 However, recent developments in Mercosur anno 2016, following political changes in Argentina and Brazil, have put these developments again in a different light. One can observe further that there is not necessarily a consensus on how 'cycles', 'waves', 'generations' or 'periods' should be identified and delimited in time. Just as there were and are differing views on how to periodize

'old regionalism'<u>6</u>, there are currently also different views on whether contemporary regionalism has entered a new period (post-new regionalism) or whether it should still be considered as being in a transition period, leading to something new.<u>7</u> Until very recently, various observers emphasized thereby the divergent paths of the Pacific Alliance countries, on the one hand, and the Mercosurcentered countries, on the other.<u>8</u> Other (pessimistic) voices have continuously emphasized the fragmented nature of Latin American regionalism and the absence of regional integration.<u>9</u>

The aim of this short paper is not to present a new theoretical framework for analyzing Latin American regionalism, nor to present a normative position on where it should go. Its aim is simply to review (part of) the recent literature (mainly written by Latin American scholars) and present some observations of a methodological nature. The ambition of this paper is to contribute to the definition of the research agenda for the coming years.

My observations are organized in three points: a first point on the connection between the debate on Latin American regionalism and the debates on the future of IR, a second point on the issue of comparability (and the case of EU), and a third point on the potential of Latin America-centered empirical research.

Connecting the debate on Latin American regionalism with the debates on the future of IR

There seem to be interesting opportunities to connect the debate on Latin American regionalism with the current debates on the future of IR. These refer not only to shifting the debates from 'international' to 'global' and the incorporation of multi-level approaches, but also to the challenges of building a theoretical framework that goes beyond Eurocentric, western or core paradigms.10 Within these debates, it has been suggested to incorporate regional context, to let regional "schools" play a role, or even to give the study of regions a central place in the Globalizing IR research agenda.11

In line with assessments of 'peripheral scholarship' such as Tickner's12, one should thereby probably be ready to adopt a flexible and open approach to theorizing which includes the production of 'knowledge'13 or the generation of 'pre-theories'.14 The former category can be defined as ideas and formative discourses that precede the formation of social theories; the latter can be defined as "elements of thinking that do not necessarily add upon to theory in their own right, but which provide starting points for doing so".15

Accepting the validity of regionally contextualized theorizing leads inevitably to the question about universalism (nomothetic approach) versus exceptionalism (idiographic approach)<u>16</u>, but is perfectly compatible with a balanced position according to which the production of theoretical (i.e. more general, cross-regional) knowledge is possible, as also argued by Buzan and Acharya.<u>17</u>

The debates on regionalism in Latin America have historically shown their capability to produce original (normative) ideas and to contribute to theorizing. Since the early days of independence in the 19th century until the early 20th century, various political leaders and thinkers have presented arguments in favour of closer regional unity, mainly for political and (external) security reasons, i.e. the protection of the independence and autonomy of the young states on the American continent.18 The economic dimension was less present in their reasoning, especially around the turn of the century, when resource-based extra-regional export-led development paths were followed in many

countries.<u>19</u> Only gradually, proposals for the creation of intra-regional customs unions re-emerged in various South American countries, especially from the 1920s onwards.<u>20</u>

Without any doubt, these early developments still cast their shadow on more recent thinking about regionalism in Latin America. $\underline{21}$ In the second half of the 20^{th} century, mainly two lines of thought have constituted recognizable Latin American contributions to the understanding of regionalism: structuralism and autonomism.

The Latin American structuralist school proposed a development strategy centred around an endogenous process of industrialization, in order to transit to a less dependent development path and more symmetric international commercial exchanges.22 This school is thus clearly linked to the more radical dependency school in some aspects, although not necessarily sharing other paradigmatic elements.23 For the structuralists, regional economic integration was seen as compatible with the above mentioned development model and its related import-substitution industrialization strategy, as it was a way to selectively opening the domestic markets, thus making it possible to achieve economies of scale. It was promoted by ECLAC and its Secretary-General Raúl Prebisch and influenced the design of various regional integration schemes in the 1960s.24

Another line of Latin American thinking consisted in theorizing the (political) concept of autonomy. It is associated with authors like Jaguaribe and Puig.25Their contributions present a model of how the international system works, but there is also an important normative component. Regional cooperation and integration appear as means to both achieve national viability and optimize the insertion of Latin America in the global system.

Not only have Latin American scholars thus demonstrated their capacity to produce original ideas about regionalism, i.e. contrasting with European ideas, but it has been argued that the theoretical debates on IR in Latin American *tout court* have been revolving around regionalism.<u>26</u>

More intense engagement with the global debates on the future of IR is likely to lead to fruitful two-way interaction. Of importance thereby is that the Globalizing IR agenda is not understood as the creation of a number of islands of theorizing where knowledge is generated about a regional reality within the context of a regional normative agenda. Of particular interest for the global IR community would precisely be to use the Latin American context and research priorities to tackle more general questions, and for which the Latin American research community is likely to be able to produce value added. I will come back to this in section four but these more general questions refer *inter alia* to the following topics: the conceptualization of autonomy; the construction of discourses, strategies and policies pursuing autonomy; the linkages between intra-regional and extra-regional relations; the linkages between regionalism and autonomy; the domestic political economy of regionalism; the implications of interpresidentialism for international relations; the linkages between electoral cycles, regime change, and the (dis)continuity of foreign policy; etc. At the same time, and referring again to the two-way interaction which was mentioned before, research agendas of other regions can/should inspire the Latin American agenda.

Connecting Latin American regionalism with comparative regionalism

In this process of getting to grips with the dynamics of Latin American regionalism, Vivares 27 and others have called for breaking out of the established 'conceptual prisons'. This is echoed by

an increasingly critical (and sometimes hostile) attitude among many Latin American regionalism scholars towards the EU, be it as a case, a model, an institution, an academic center, or in still another capacity<u>28</u>.

This negative attitude is understandable as the EU has (over-)dominated the academic and policy debates on regionalism worldwide, and in Latin America, for several decades. And (well-intentioned, and often solid) recent European research on diffusion29, is not likely to curb this tendency, on the contrary.

I agree that conceptual frameworks can hinder the development of relevant research, but —adopting a Latin American perspective<u>30</u>— at the same time there is a need for a more balanced approach towards the case of the EU, even if for some purposes it might happen that the case is not relevant at all. This is something that to some extent has already been dealt with in the discussion on comparability and the 'n=1' problem<u>31</u>, but requires some further attention. The starting point of a balanced approach to the case of the EU is the explicit recognition of the fact that the EU means (or can mean) different things at the same time. These meanings include: (i) the EU as a model for regional policy-making and institution-building in Latin America, (ii) the EU as an analytical benchmark for regional policy-making and institution-building, (iii) the EU as a benchmark for federal political systems, (iv) the EU as the historical origin/context of otherwise general ontological categories, (v) the EU as the historical origin/context of otherwise general theories, (vi) the EU as an institution that has directly promoted a regional integration agenda in Latin American sub-regions, and (vii) the EU as an institution that has indirectly promoted Latin American regionalism via its preference for inter-regional diplomacy and/or the promotion of epistemic communities.

Only after making explicit 'which EU' one is talking about, one can and should assess its role and relevance. Opting for one or another alternative meaning will necessarily lead to distinct conclusions. Overall, a nuanced view seems inevitable.

For example, if one focuses on option (i) (i.e. the EU as a model for regional policy-making and institution-building in Latin America), this amounts to an essentially empirical question in retrospect (i.e. weighing intra- and extra-regional drivers), and to a political position from a forward-looking perspective. As to the former, as will be argued below, there are -generally speaking- obvious reasons not to underestimate the weight of intra-regional drivers and the regional production of ideas on regionalism, as well as there are good reasons to acknowledge European influences on Latin American thinking and on the design of certain regional institutions.<u>32</u>

If one focuses on options (iv) or (v) (i.e. the EU as the historical origin/context of otherwise general ontological categories and/or theories), one will have to recognize the sufficiently general character of several concepts and (testable) theories. In addition, as Malamud<u>33</u> has shown, European theories can be combined, adapted and widened, e.g. by zooming in on the role of executive intervention, so that they become better adapted for studying regionalisms elsewhere (i.e. in Latin America). Of course, this is contingent on the choice of the research question in the first place.

If one is interested in answering different research questions (for Latin America) than the ones underlying the established theories (for the EU), then the question of relevance and applicability of the theories is a false problem. It goes without saying that for a considerable set of research questions, other (*i.e.* non-EU) cases will be better comparators.

Connecting Latin American data to general research questions

There is room for a better valorization of the empirical material on Latin American regionalisms and, also, for additional monitoring and data collection efforts. Latin American regionalism has a long and rich history and shows a large variety of —often overlapping— experiences. More benefit could be taken from intra-regional comparisons and further analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data, leading to general conclusions on aspects of regional dynamics with a relevance that goes beyond the region.34

A good example of how regionally generated data can lead to theoretical advancement is provided by the conceptual work on the 'hub-and-spoke model'<u>35</u> and on 'spaghetti bowls'<u>36</u>. Although these concepts as such emerged in North America, the dynamics of regional integration and, specifically, the proliferation of FTAs centered around the US, Mexico and Chile since the 1990s provided their essential empirical base. The same is true for the neo-liberal variant of new regionalism as interpreted by the IDB<u>37</u> and others.<u>38</u>One can see clear possibilities to base further conceptual work on, for example, the linkages between implementing large infrastructure works (using data from IIRSA/COSIPLAN) and intra-regional interdependence and development, or on the interaction between the organization and dynamics of intra-regional value chains and regional rule-making.<u>39</u>

In the political realm, a good example is the work on inter-presidentialism rooted in the regional brand of centralized inter-governmental decision-making in Mercosur and, by extension, South America.40 There is scope for more work on the political economy of Latin American regionalism.41 Especially in a context of inter-presidentialism and ideologization of regional policies, a better understanding of the role of meso-level political-economy actors (including business interests) might well have the potential to explain gaps between rethoric and practice. In the political realm, one can thus see several interesting avenues for further work. A first avenue concerns the linkages between (dominant) ideologies, models of regionalism, and real-world policy-making. A related avenue is to give firmer empirical ground to hypotheses on the new role that some regional organizations, such as UNASUR, are playing in promoting a social and rights-based development agenda in the region.42 A second avenue concerns the use of data (e.g. on the Andean Community) to deepen our understanding of compliance of states with international (here: regional) commitments. A third avenue concerns the possibilities for further innovative work on overlapping regionalisms from a governance point of view, using Latin American data, for example following the analytical framework suggested by Nolte.43

Finally, connecting the two realms, more empirical work on the geo-economic centrality of Brazil44 could well contribute to a better understanding of Brazil's role in the region and on regional leadership more in general.45

Conclusions

In this article, stock is taken of the recent Latin American literature on Latin American regionalism and a few ideas are presented with the aim to contribute to shaping the research agenda for the near future.

A first point refers to the possibility for Latin American regionalists to engage more closely with the discussion on the Globalizing IR agenda. This would seem to be only a natural step as Latin American theorizing in IR has paid important attention to regionalism. It was emphasized that this

interaction is two-way and that it supposes that the political/normative and region-oriented work goes hand-in-hand with theoretical ambition beyond the regional context.

A second point is related to comparative regionalism and the treatment of the EU. Generally speaking, there are good reasons to approach Latin American regionalism from a comparative perspective. But whether other cases of regionalism are thereby good comparators depends on the specific research question(s) which is (are) being addressed.<u>46</u> It is well-known that case selection is indeed not necessarily a strong point of comparative regionalism. Among possible comparators, the EU is obviously a very specific case for a number of reasons. As explained above, however, the EU has multiple meanings which are not always well distinguished in current debates, including the ones in a Latin American context. Taking into account these multiple meanings, this article calls for a nuanced treatment of the EU as a case and/or comparator.

A third point is related to the optimization of the use which is made of data generated in Latin America. As can easily be seen, the rich data on Latin American regionalisms can be used to address research questions with a relevance that goes well beyond the region. In addition, there seem to be ample possibilities for new data collection efforts, in turn leading to further innovative work.

Notes

1 The author thanks the participants in the I International Workshop on "Regionalism and Integration Processes in Latin America" (CEFIR, Université de Liège, Nov. 24th 2015), as well as an anonymous reviewer, for their comments.

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29 See e.g. VASCONCELOS (A.), 'European Union and Mercosur', in TELÒ (M.) (ed.), *European Union and New Regionalism Regional Actors and Global Governance in a Post-Hegemonic Era*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2009, p. 165-184, Second Edition; LENZ (T.), 'Problematizing the EU's Model Export to Mercosur- Strategies and Motivations', Paper prepared for the GARNET conference on The European Union in International Affairs Brussels, 24-26 April, 2008; BÖRZEL (T.A.) and RISSE (T.), 'Diffusing (Inter-) Regionalism. The EU as a Model of Regional Integration', *KFG Working Paper Series*, n° 7, 2009; LAZAROU (E.), 'A paradigm in trouble? The effects of the Euro crisis on the European model for regional integration in South America', in FIORAMONTI (L.) (ed.), *Regions and Crises: New Challenges for Contemporary Regionalisms*, Basingstoke, Palgrave McMillan, 2012, p. 180-230.

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<u>33</u> MALAMUD (A.), 'Regional Integration in Latin America. Comparative Theories and Institutions', *Sociologia. Problemas e Práticas*, vol. 44, 2004, p. 135-54.

<u>34</u> In addition, especially understudied is the interesting case of Central American regional integration. See e.g. RUEDA-JUNQUERA (F.), 'Regional Integration in Central America', in: SÁNCHEZ-ANCOCHEA (D.) and MARTÍ I PUIG (S.) (eds), *Handbook of Central American Governance*, Abingdon-New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 335-349.

<u>35</u> WONNACOTT (R.J.), 'Canada's Future in a World of Trade Blocs: a Proposal', *Canadian Public Policy*, vol. 1, n° 1, 1975, p. 118-130; WONNACOTT (R.J.), 'Controlling Trade and and Foreign Investment in the Canadian Economy: Some proposals', *Canadian Journal of Economics*, vol. 15, 1982, p. 574-576; WONNACOTT (R.J.), 'Trade and Investment in a Hub-and-Spoke System Versus a Free Trade Area', *The World Economy*, vol. 19, n° 3, 1996, p. 237-252; WONNACOTT (R.J.) and WONNACOTT (P.), 'El TLCAN y los acuerdos comerciales en las Américas', in KRUGMAN (P.) et al., *Las Américas: Integración económica en perspectiva*, Bogotá, DNP-BID, 1996, p. 103-136.

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<u>37</u> IDB,*Beyond Borders. The New Regionalism in Latin America. Economic and Social Progress in Latin America 2002 Report*, Washington, Inter-American Development Bank, 2002.

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<u>40</u> DE NÚÑEZ (A.), 'La diplomacia presidencial', *Archivos del Presente*, vol. 3, n° 10, 1997, p. 133-139; DANESE (S.), *Diplomacia presidencial. História e crítica*, Topbooks, Rio de Janeiro, 1999; MALAMUD (A.), 'Presidentialism in the Southern Cone. A Framework for Analysis', *EUI Working Papers SPS*, n° 1; MALAMUD (A.), 'Regional Integration in Latin America. Comparative Theories and Institutions', *Sociologia. Problemas e Práticas*, vol. 44, 2004, p. 135-54; MALAMUD (A.), 'Presidential Diplomacy and the Institutional Underpinnings of Mercosur: An Empirical Examination', *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 40, n° 1, 2005, p. 138-164; MALAMUD (A.), 'Presidentialist Decision Making in Latin American Foreign Policy: Examples from Regional Integration Processes', in DOMÍNGUEZ (J.I.) and COVARRUBIAS (A.) (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Latin America in the World*, New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 112-123.

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