

Regional cohesiveness: alternative or complement to “regional integration”?

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Abstract

Irrespective of the particular intellectual legacies, one idea permeates throughout most of international regionalism scholarship, namely that, eventually, cooperation leads to integration. In this paper, I reconstruct the concept of regionalism and its related field using the concept of region, and show that only four categories of regionalism may be identified but regional integration is not among them. This happens because, at a closer examination of its conceptual and empirical basis, regional integration proves nothing more than an ideological project. Yet, unlike any other existing explanatory models, the integration paradigm provides the most advanced framework for describing the way in which certain areas develop and remain distinct from others in terms of political action. If the integrative perspective is abandoned, one is deprived of an important tool for analysing relevant political phenomena. If it is maintained in the existing form, the risk of circular argumentation and ideological bias remains high. As a possible solution for this dilemma, I propose the concept of “regional cohesiveness” defined as the degree to which a group of social actors inhabiting a limited contiguous space act and/or represent themselves as a group. This degree can be assessed both in material and discursive terms. More specifically, it indicates the institutional and discursive practices within the respective group. These practices generate a number of institutional and discursive products and are informed by particular institutional and discursive structures, contexts and backgrounds. Due to the design of its field, “regional cohesiveness” is a social (conventional) constructivist concept. Given the scarce constructivist approaches to international regionalism, research on “regional cohesiveness” might contribute to a higher infusion of constructivism into the international regionalism debates. Nonetheless, as shown in the last part of the paper, this concept may be also congruent with other approaches that used so far the integration/interdependence paradigm.

Keywords: international regionalism, regional integration, regional cohesiveness, constructivism

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