

INSIGHT BRIEF

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The Transformation of Comparative Regionalism

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Background

For more than 60 years, two perspectives have dominated Comparative Regionalism as a field of research. On one side, there is a long tradition of taking European integration as the foundation and model, even as the ‘gold standard’, for conceptual development, theory-building, comparison, and the design of regional institutions and policies. This has given rise to numerous hub-and-spoke comparisons centred on the European Union (EU).

On the other side, scholars reject the EU as the key referent due to its alleged uniqueness and the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological problems of EU-centrism. Consequently, scholars theorise and compare *non*-European cases.

We refer to this chasm as that between the EU versus the rest. The two sides criticise each other based on what each sees as its respective strength, reifying the divide.

In our new open access article [Comparative Regionalism beyond Europe versus the rest](#) published (open access) in the leading journal *Review of International Studies* (Cambridge University Press), we challenge this characterization by showing how the research field has fundamentally changed in the last decade or so. We describe three ‘silent’ transformations (conceptually, theoretically and methodologically) to suggest that the EU is increasingly

Highlights

This Brief illustrates that Comparative Regionalism has recently undergone three ‘silent’ transformations which have moved it beyond the struggle between EU-centric and EU-critical scholarship.

Conceptually, scholars disaggregate regionalism into specific components, rendering systematic comparison more tractable and less case-centric.

Theoretically, scholars develop frameworks that build on general social science theories and actively seek to overcome EU-centrism (‘integration snobbery’) as well as exaggerated EU-criticism (‘area centricity’).

Methodologically, scholars use more rigorous comparative designs and a broader range of data.

The benefit of the field’s maturing lies in the intellectual energy generated from being ‘freed-up’ and from the new links formed with other sub-fields.

The price of this transformation is three-fold: the risk of covert as opposed to overt EU-centrism, increased barriers to entry and the costs associated with cross-regional data collection, and finally, the risk of ‘gatekeeping’ which threatens the field’s pluralism and diversity.

integrated into a genuinely comparative research agenda. These three transformations show, we argue, that the chasm between the EU and regionalism in the rest of the world — or between ‘integration snobbery’ versus ‘area-centrism’ — has ceased to be CR’s defining characteristic.

Transforming Conceptualization: Disaggregating Regional Cooperation and Integration

The first transformation is *conceptual*. Much prior research sought to analyse processes of regionalism in their entirety, while core concepts were contested both analytically (how are they best defined and operationalized?) and normatively (what referents and normative ambitions do they invoke?).

Today, the holistic conceptual perspective has given way to a dominant style of analysis that disaggregates regionalism into more specific elements, such as individual policy fields, norms, governance mechanisms or institutions. This conceptual transformation is closely related to the expansion of regionalism as an empirical phenomenon, specifically the growing scope and differentiation of regionalism in terms of policy fields and the expanded authority of many regional organizations, which has entailed a growing complexity in institutional frameworks and a more diverse set of

generalized beyond it (EU-centric perspective) or was tailored to understanding specific instances of regionalism in the Global South, with little interest in broader generalization (EU-critical perspective). A particular problem was that the strand of literature that drew on more general social science theories was largely confined to explaining the EU.

The field has changed. We demonstrate that scholars develop frameworks that build on *general* social science theories and actively seek to move beyond EU-centrism. Here, we highlight recent governance approaches, work on authoritarian regionalism that is build off of cases from the Global South, and research that self-reflexively questions and tries to overcome EU-centrism, such as the ‘decentering agenda’.

Transforming Methodology: Changed Methodologies and the ‘Data Revolution’

The third transformation is *methodological*. How do we generate valid and reliable knowledge about regionalism? For a long time, the comparative study of regionalism was characterized by a strained relationship between the EU versus the rest, overlapping in methodological terms with the broader divide between disciplinary research versus area studies. There was a conflictual relationship between

methodological approaches, especially between quantitative and qualitative methods.

The methodological divide is gradually decreasing, and more sophisticated studies in terms of comparative methodology and case selection are on the rise.

Our article propose that scholars

use more rigorous comparative designs and a broader range of data. Maybe the most notable trend is what we call a ‘data revolution’, that is, the emergence of large-N datasets of regional organizations on core analytical dimensions such as institutional design, policy output, and self-legitimation discourses. But we also emphasize that much qualitative research has become more self-reflexive in terms of case selection, operationalization and measurement of core concepts and actual comparison.

The Price of ‘Mainstreaming’

A struggle over the EU’s role has dominated the field of Comparative Regionalism for the past six decades. We argue

The chasm between the EU and regionalism in the rest of the world — or between ‘integration snobbery’ versus ‘area-centrism’ — has ceased to be Comparative Regionalism’s defining characteristic

participating actors. An essential result of these developments is not only that systematic comparison has become more tractable and widespread but also that the EU is generally treated as one case within a larger universe of cases, without special status.

Transforming Theorizing: General Social Science Theories and Self-Reflexive Criticism of EU-centrism

The second transformation is *theoretical*. How do we explain regionalism? What are the drivers of variation? The EU versus the rest divide was characterized by theory that either derived directly from the European integration experience and was

that the research field has entered a new phase, moving it beyond the EU versus the rest chasm. Increasingly, the EU is integrated into a more self-consciously comparative research agenda, built around general concepts and theoretical arguments as well as more rigorous comparative designs and research methods.

The benefits of a more mature research agenda are two-fold: first, intellectual energy is freed to further improve existing research. Second, findings more easily link up with, and ultimately promise to shape, broader debates in political science, International Relations and Comparative Area Studies; as a result, the field becomes less isolated and parochial. These two are, in short, the benefits of ‘mainstreaming’.

‘Mainstreaming’ the research field, however, comes at a three-fold price. First, even though (the most) overt forms of EU-centrism have come to an end, EU-centrism may survive in less overt forms that are harder to detect. This pertains particularly to the relationship between EU-centrism and continued ‘Western’ dominance in global knowledge production.

Second, while more pluralism and diversity in terms of the sociological characteristics of the research field are clearly desirable, mainstreaming may make these harder to achieve since it may raise barriers to entry and the financial resources needed to produce scholarship that stands a chance of competing successfully over scarce publication space,

especially in peer-reviewed journals. For example, compiling large datasets or conducting extensive fieldwork in several regions that underpins broad comparison are expensive and time-consuming undertakings. There is little doubt that knowledge production in Comparative Regionalism remains skewed towards ‘Western’ scholars and those located in ‘Western’ academic institutions.

Third, mainstreaming may render the field less heterogeneous and often entails a stronger ‘hierarchization’ and patrolling of boundaries that make it harder for heterodox and non-mainstream approaches to be heard. This danger requires an active will by ‘gatekeepers’ to retain pluralism and heterogeneity, which we see as a distinct strength of Comparative Regionalism. Similarly, pluralism requires that those identifying with ‘non-mainstream’ approaches find it meaningful to engage in scientific dialogue with the ‘mainstream.’

EDITORIAL INFORMATION

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