Theorising regions through changes in statehood: rethinking the theory and method of comparative regionalism

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Theorising regions through changes in statehood: rethinking the theory and method of comparative regionalism

SHAHAR HAMEIRI*

Abstract. The study of regionalism is often characterised as too fragmented, plagued by disagreements over such fundamental matters as its ontological and epistemological premises, which also hinder efforts at substantive comparison of regionalisation processes. In this article it is argued that to overcome these problems, what is required is a more rigorous incorporation of such studies within relevant work in state theory and political geography. The key insight herein is that regionalism should not be studied separately from the state as these are interrelated phenomena. State-making and regionalisation are both manifestations of contested political projects aimed at shaping the territorial, institutional, and/or functional scope of political rule. Furthermore, the article also distils the lines of a mechanismic methodology for comparative regionalism. Its main advantage is in overcoming the implicit benchmarking of regional development we find in other approaches. The framework’s utility is then demonstrated through a comparison of regional governance in Asia and Europe.

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Introduction

In a field characterised mainly by disagreement, there is one thing on which most agree – that the concept of ‘region’ and its derivatives have been used in a remarkably diverse, confusing and imprecise manner by political scientists.¹ This diversity

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of definition and purpose is also often said to inhibit attempts at substantive comparisons of regional integration processes, leading instead to more narrow comparative studies, of regional institutions or economic integration, for example. In this respect, Björn Hettne has argued that the difficulty of agreeing on the ontological and epistemological premises of the study of regions pertains to the incredible diversity of regional projects around the world. Therefore, he claims that the main challenge facing students of regionalism is to ‘theorise a fast emerging empirical phenomenon without much theory to work from’. Yet, the problem is not so much a dearth in the theorisation of regionalism and regionalisation. It is rather the prevalent disjuncture between studies of regionalism and the literatures on state theory and the politics of scale. In fact, what is needed is a more rigorous incorporation of our analysis of regionalisation processes within existing theories of state transformation and regulatory governance. The specialist literature on the European Union (EU) has covered much of this ground, but its insights have generally not found their way into the study of other regions and the implications for the comparative project as a whole have only recently begun to be considered.

This article provides a critical overview of the literature on regionalism and then identifies the way in which work in state theory and political geography overcomes some of its limitations, especially in relation to the comparative enterprise. In particular, it is argued that an emphasis on the links between state territoriality, state transformation, regionalisation, and the politics of scale, allows for explaining and hence comparing the processes through which governance is rescaled, thereby moving beyond the ubiquitous preoccupation with evaluating institutional form (formal or informal), degree of integration (more or less), or governance outputs (effective or dysfunctional). By focusing on the relationship between particular regionalisation projects and the sociopolitical forces driving or resisting these we can avoid ending up with regional benchmarking exercises.

Specifically, I argue that though states and regions are not identical phenomena, both are manifestations of struggles over the territorial, institutional, and functional scope of political rule. At the heart of the politics of regionalisation is the attempt by actors and coalitions to relocate the governance of particular issues beyond the scope of national governance and politics. This rescaling is not incidental, but designed to empower particular interests, while weakening or wholly marginalising others.

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5 See, for example, Andrew Jordan and Adriaan Schout, The Coordination of the European Union: Exploring the Capacities of Networked Governance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

This argument was motivated by John Agnew’s charge to transcend the ‘territorial trap’ – the problematic assumptions of many International Relations (IR) scholars regarding the relationship between state and territory: that the state commands sovereignty over its entire territorial jurisdiction; that political and economic life is separated neatly into domestic and international realms; and that economy and society are defined by state borders. Indeed, rather than presupposing the demarcation between state and region, or viewing regions necessarily as products of state action, it is argued here that the precise location of this boundary is often one of the main issues at stake in regionalisation. The politics of regionalisation could thus be understood as a unique kind of territorial politics. It is similar to more conventional forms of territorial politics, which typically focus on the relationship between subnational regions and national governments, in that it centres on contestations over the scale at which particular issues are to be governed. It differs, however, because regionalisation is often concerned with the creation of new spatial and territorial constructs that may vary according to the issues and forces involved. In such instances, boundaries must not only be defended, but actually defined.

Furthermore and related to the previous point, there is a need to rethink our methodological tools for comparing regional processes. This article is not alone in proposing an emphasis on ‘process’ in the comparative study of regions. The problem with most attempts to compare processes of region-making, however, is that they treat process as a dependent variable of other issues, such as the national interest of participating states, domestic institutions, or identity. The comparison therefore is typically not of the processes themselves but of the location of case studies on a variously defined ladder of regional development that is external to the process in question. ‘Process’ in these cases essentially refers to regional projects moving from one level to another; for example, from a vaguely defined regional space to a highly institutionalised region with capacities to act independently in world politics. Thus, rather than conceptualising and comparing processes, such studies ultimately seek to identify a relationship between governance outcomes and facilitating or hindering conditions. The result is that existing studies often run into the problems of definition and incompatibility mentioned at the top, rather than capturing the essence of regionalisation processes of various forms.

Though the full elaboration of what a methodology of process might look like exceeds the objectives of this article, it is argued here that mechanisms provide

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a useful way forward. This is (a) because mechanisms help identify case studies worthy of comparison, when similar mechanisms are observed in seemingly very different settings; and (b) since by focusing on key moments of change mechanisms help trace long-term historical processes.

The article proceeds in three steps. The first section is a critical evaluation of the literature on the comparative study of regions, while the second develops the article’s theoretical and methodological contribution to comparative regionalism. In the final section I provide a short illustration of the framework by explaining the rise of regulatory regionalism in Asia and Europe.

The study of regions and the problem of comparison

The study of regions, regionalism, regionalisation, regional governance, regional integration, regional cooperation, and other proximate terms has burgeoned since the 1990s, along with the real-world emergence of the so-called ‘new regionalism’ in that period, as well as the expansion and development of the EU. Yet, for all the vibrancy of the literature and its considerable conceptual and theoretical development over the past two decades, one detects a palpable unease among scholars. There is often a sense that the study of regionalism is too fragmented and lacks sufficient theoretical and conceptual common ground. The problem, according to Hettne, extends to issues of ontology – ‘what we study when we study regionalism’ – and epistemology – how to study regions. With such fundamental disagreements it is clear why comparative regionalism has often been such a fraught exercise.

Indeed, the main questions, upon which there is currently limited agreement, are very basic – how to define regions; what drives their emergence; how they relate to other levels of governance and government and the international system as a whole; and finally, how to compare them. The exception is EU studies, where because of the (problématique) sui generis assumptions of many the focus has shifted to middle-range theory. The EU, some argue, represents a new kind of polity, which could also be studied with the tools of comparative politics and public policy, rather than the International Relations and international political economy frameworks that dominate scholarly inquiries into regionalism elsewhere. European experience has unfortunately yielded few comparative insights, though there are signs this may be changing. Below I briefly examine the main problems plaguing the study


16 Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond, ‘Across the EU-New Regionalism Frontier’; Breslin, ‘Comparative Theory, China’.
of regions in political science, especially in relation to the comparative enterprise. These could be summarised as (a) conceptual abundance and incompatibility; and (b) an inability to break free from a teleological terminology of regional development.

In the first wave of regionalism studies from the 1950s to the mid-1970s many attempted to define regions ‘scientifically’.\textsuperscript{17} Scholars, such as Russett, Cantori and Spiegel, and Thompson, essentially sought to identify the relationship between regionalism and factors such as social, economic, political, and organisational cohesiveness within a group of geographically proximate states.\textsuperscript{18}

In contrast, there is now a meta-theoretical consensus that regions are ‘politically made’.\textsuperscript{19} Various constructivist perspectives consequently appear to be in favour;\textsuperscript{20} though an important distinction has to be drawn between social constructivist approaches that emphasise the role of ideas, norms, and identity in forging regions,\textsuperscript{21} and other approaches, broadly associated with critical political economy, which view regionalism as a political project embedded in particular material relations.\textsuperscript{22} While geography remains for the most part important to the way regions are defined,\textsuperscript{23} new behavioural or ‘geopsychological’ conceptions have also emerged.\textsuperscript{24}

To complicate matters further, many contemporary studies, particularly within the so-called New Regionalism Approach,\textsuperscript{25} have aimed to move beyond the privileging of states as the main actors in regional processes characteristic of earlier work, as well as of neorealist or neoliberal institutionalist approaches.\textsuperscript{26} The result is a much expanded field that includes informal forms of regionalisation driven by civil society or private actors.\textsuperscript{27} There are now many studies of macro-regions, micro-regions, cross-border regions and inter-regional relations, but this incredible pluralism

\textsuperscript{17} Hurrell, ‘Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective’, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{25} See Hettne and Söderbaum, ‘Theorising the Rise of Regionness’.
has led to the emergence of a plethora of often incompatible concepts, which frequently masks the fact that they are proximate phenomena. As Söderbaum points out, while constructivist theories of regionalism have undoubtedly advanced the field, ‘such (inter)subjective understandings of regions pose certain challenges for systematic comparison.’

To cut through this complexity, authors have often sought to distinguish between ‘regionalism’ – formal, state-led projects of region-making that often involve a certain degree of institutionalisation – and ‘regionalisation’ – ‘the growth of societal integration within a region and the often undirected processes of social and economic interaction’. This distinction has also come to be central to the analysis of regional integration varieties. In particular, scholars of Asian regionalism have argued that Asia’s relative dearth of formal institutional structures does not mean regionalism there is inferior to the European variety because bottom-up regionalisation is robust.

But despite their rejection of regional ‘league-tables’, students of regionalism have struggled to find a way of thinking about and comparing regions that goes beyond assessments of more or less institutionalisation and its relation to political outcomes. Hettne and Söderbaum, for example, use the term ‘regionness’ to refer to ‘the process whereby a geographical area is transformed from a passive object to an active subject capable of articulating the transnational interests of the emergent region’. Careful to deny theirs is a teleological view of regional integration, Hettne and Söderbaum nevertheless identify five levels of regionness essentially on the spectrum from regional ‘spaces’ defined through embryonic trade relations and war, to very informal regions, with low levels of regional agency, and ultimately to highly institutionalised regions, with high levels of agency.

To avert the confusion that stems from too many contending conceptualisations, some studies have taken the approach that less is more, seeking to identify a relatively narrow area of inquiry that makes comparison easier. The most important recent example is the edited book by Acharya and Johnston, Crafting Regional Cooperation, which focuses on the significance of regional organisational design. Others have opted to advance the debate through conceptual consolidation. Perhaps the most important of these studies is Warleigh-Lack’s effort to bridge the gap between Integration Theory and New Regionalism. Rightly arguing that the assumed incommensurability between these approaches is exaggerated, Warleigh-Lack proposes to avoid the problem of definition by using a single concept – regionalisation. He defines regionalisation as

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29 Söderbaum, ‘Consolidating Comparative Regionalism’, p. 3.


an explicit, but not necessarily formally institutionalised, process of adapting participant state norms, policy making processes, policy styles, policy content, political opportunity structures, economies and identity (potentially at both elite and popular levels) to both align with and shape a new collective set of priorities, norms and interests at regional level, which may itself then evolve, dissolve or reach stasis.34

Warleigh-Lack argues that because regionalisation does not focus on outcomes there is also no need to have a yardstick like the EU in mind.35

Warleigh-Lack’s emphasis on process shows the way for bridging the gaps in comparative regionalism. Yet, for all its sophistication his framework is let down by two issues on which I will elaborate in the next section – one theoretical and the other methodological. First, he still does not provide a theory that explains the politics of regionalisation, focusing instead on the observed, descriptive dimensions of regionalism. We still do not know why regional governance develops one way or another. Second, Warleigh-Lack conceives of regionalisation as a dependent variable shaped by a set of four independent variables – genesis, functionality, socialisation, and impact.36 In so doing he echoes Haas’s earlier contention that a ‘putative’ understanding of the dependent variable is necessary for advancing a successful theory of regional integration.37 However, a covariational methodology that aims to explain the existence of one variable by linking it to others is not well-suited to the study of large-scale and complex historical processes. This methodology would likely provide snapshots of the process without identifying causality and direction. It is not that historical accounts are impossible from this perspective,38 but that they will tend to generate limited insights into the dynamics of transformation associated with regionalisation processes, remaining largely descriptive.

Regions and how to compare them

The problems of definition and comparison plaguing the comparative study of regions arguably have two interrelated sources. The first relates to the kind of questions comparativists are inclined to ask. Generally, they have tended to compare regions with other regions rather than place the region problématique in the broader context of how political rule is spatially and institutionally organised. More specifically, comparativists have often used the EU either as a positive (‘yardstick’) or as a negative (‘nothing like it’) comparator for other regional projects.39 Therefore, the question of the relationship between particular regionalisation projects and the sociopolitical forces driving or resisting these has often been downplayed. The second stems from the regionalism literature’s emergence within IR and international political economy, which has seen it develop largely in isolation from studies of state theory, governance, political geography, and even the specialist EU literature, where a more interdisciplinary body of work has emerged. As a result, the links

35 Ibid., p. 759.
36 Ibid., p. 762; also Warleigh-Lack, ‘The EU in Comparative Perspective’.
38 See Warleigh-Lack, ‘The EU in Comparative Perspective’.
39 De Lombaerde et al., ‘The Problems and Divides in Comparative Regionalism’, p. 29.
between regional phenomena and other sociopolitical formations, such as the state, have rarely been interrogated.

In contrast, a key claim of this article is that regionalism and state-making are in fact often part of the same political project; a project concerned with the spatial and institutional organisation of political rule. Thus, the main questions I ask are what is the relationship between social and political forces and the emergence, consolidation and disintegration of particular territorial and spatial formations? And what are the interrelations between scaled forms of political rule? These questions will be addressed in the theory section below. Then, I will provide the outlines of a methodology of comparative regionalism. It is argued that mechanisms enable the comparison of processes of regionalisation by focusing on pivotal moments of change in the regionalisation process, thus avoiding the tendency to compare degrees of regional development, which presupposes a benchmark against which the assessment is made.

*Theorising regionalisation (and its absence)*

Three decades ago, Peter Cocks chastised integration theory for being ‘fundamentally ahistorical’. Cocks did not argue that history was wholly ignored by students of integration, but that they had ‘used history as a data bank to provide generalizations applicable irrespective of space or time about the necessary conditions for integration’. Though the study of regionalism has since progressed considerably, this weakness persists and the challenge remains making historical processes of emergence, transformation, and decline integral to a theory of regionalism, and to comparative regionalism.

One of the ways in which contemporary scholars of integration have aimed to overcome the problem Cocks mentions, with some success, is by opening up the definition of the dependent variable, a direction already indicated by Haas. The anticipated outcome of integration thus becomes context-specific, socially constructed, and contested. Though it is certainly useful to look at contestations over the definition and purpose of regionalism, there is still not enough in such frameworks, much like earlier integration theory, to explain why particular forms of regional governance emerge in particular historical moments and in particular parts of the world, and then change or decline.

I propose to go about the study of regions the other way around. Instead of starting from regions (how they are defined, what we mean by integration, etc.) and working our way back to identify the conditions conducive to regional arrangements thus defined, it is more useful to locate regional governance within a broader analysis of social and political power relations. Indeed, from the perspective advanced here, regionalisation processes are historically specific governance (political) projects driven by particular and identifiable social and political coalitions.

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43 In particular, see De Lombaerde et al., ‘The Problems and Divides in Comparative Regionalism’.
44 Jayasuriya, ‘Introduction’.
The relationship between domestic coalitions and regional cooperation is central in the pioneering work of Etel Solingen. Solingen argues that the nature and ambitions of domestic coalitions affect regional institutional genesis mainly in those cases in which the consequences of creating institutions for power distribution, transaction costs, and norms are insignificant or difficult to gauge. This study differs from Solingen’s in two ways. First, it is not restricted to regional institutions, though explaining their emergence and development is certainly important, but incorporates other forms of regional governance as well. Second, I do not start from a position of methodological nationalism, which presupposes a clear demarcation between domestic and regional politics and agency, but rather view the precise location of this boundary as one of the main issues at stake in conflicts over regionalisation.

The significance of this distinction is made apparent when we contrast it with existing definitions of region, even where these aim to be as inclusive as possible. De Lombaerde et al., for example, define regions negatively, particularly vis-à-vis states:

calling something a region is done because it emphasises that the geographical area with its attached social community and/or system is not a state while at the same time it can have some statehood properties … So regions can be defined as what they are not: they are not sovereign states. But they have some resemblance to states.

What is missed, however, is the increasing preponderance of various forms of ‘regulatory regionalism’. Regulatory regionalism refers to modes of regional governance located within the institutions and governing practices of the state, in a way approximating what has been variously described in the European context as ‘Europeanisation’. This kind of regional governance is not about the delineation of a non-state subnational, supranational, or transnational geographical areas with statehood properties, as De Lombaerde et al. would have it, but the transformation of the state itself so that parts of its domestic governance are ‘regionalised’. This means that state agencies and actors increasingly act as regulators bringing to bear regional disciplines on domestic social and political structures. Regulatory regionalism of this kind, in turn, is intrinsically linked to the development of regulatory forms of statehood. While regional projects are not always regulatory of course, the point is that all forms of regionalism – supranational, intergovernmental, or regulatory – embody social and political conflicts and are shaped by particular political economic circumstances, of which contemporary forms of statehood are another manifestation.

The main implication of this is that regionalism should not be studied separately from the state as these are interrelated, though not identical, phenomena. Indeed, some of the conceptual and analytic tools useful for understanding the state are also useful in the regional context and these have been under-utilised in comparative regionalism to its detriment. But first we must draw out the parts of state theory relevant for our purposes.

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46 De Lombaerde et al., ‘The Problems and Divides in Comparative Regionalism’, p. 23.
49 Hameiri and Jayasuriya, ‘Regulatory Regionalism and the Dynamics of Territorial Politics’.
The argument here is established upon a particular branch of materialist state theory, primarily associated with Poulantzas and Jessop, which conceives of the state primarily as an expression of power. State power is viewed as a set of complex and dynamic social relationships that shape the use of the state apparatus. Because these necessarily exist and morph within a context of social relations, it is problematic to view the state or its apparatus as neutral, even at the level of theoretical abstraction. This approach emphasises the role of conflicts between and within historically specific coalitions rooted primarily in the political economy – classes, class fractions, distributional coalitions and other societal groups – as crucial for understanding why particular institutions emerge, the way they function and their potential future development. The significance of institutions, therefore, resides in the sort of interests they promote or marginalise, and in the kinds of conflicts they give expression to, or structure out of politics.

This approach has had its critics, in particular neo-Weberian and institutionalist authors, such as Peter Evans, Theda Skocpol, and Adam Przeworski. These scholars have argued that the state could not be explained through society and that to understand political and economic outcomes we must look at issues such as state coherence and capacity. However, as Jessop argues:

If one posits the need to choose between the state and society as the independent variable in social analysis, one implies that both exist as independent entities which are fully constituted, internally coherent and mutually exclusive and that one always unilaterally determines the other. This would reify and absolutize what is really an emergent, partial, unstable and variable social distinction.

And this is precisely the point – the nature of statehood, citizenship and state-society relations is not static. It changes through conflict between coalitions that cut through the formal state-society divide.

Indeed, because the state is viewed from the perspective of this article as a social relation and not as a ‘thing’, it is not the unchanging creature commonly found in International Relations. It is rather constantly evolving as the social and political relationships underpinning state power change. The modern nation-state is not the endpoint of a now complete state-making process. New modes of statehood and governance continue to emerge and disintegrate, and ideas of citizenship and statecraft are adopted and challenged.

54 Skocpol, ‘Bringing the State Back In’, p. 9.
The most important process of state transformation in our time has involved the contested and highly uneven (along both geographical and functional lines) shift from the welfare and developmental states of the post-war era towards new forms of regulatory statehood. In the regulatory state, state power is increasingly located beyond the established institutions of government in new modes of governance and in the hands of experts and managers who are often not politically or popularly accountable. This is a process often referred to as the ‘disaggregation’, ‘fragmentation’, or ‘decentring’ of the state and is also associated with the emergence of various forms of multilevel and network governance.\(^{57}\) The rationalisation for the exercise of state power has also tended to shift away from the protection of domestic capital and labour towards greater emphasis on market credibility and/or risk management.\(^{58}\) Since in most post-war welfare states, though to a lesser extent in the US, capitalist social cleavages were highly institutionalised in the state and the political arena was considerably socialised along the same lines, the above-noted shifts in the organisation and exercise of state power have been variously resisted primarily by sections of domestic capital and organised labour movements, seeking to cement pre-existing privileges, albeit with uneven success.

Nonetheless, the scope of regulatory governance has undoubtedly increased. For example, in many states central banks are now mostly insulated from political controls, while a raft of unelected public and quasi-public, ‘unelected’, regulatory bodies have emerged to manage particular areas of social and economic life with considerable autonomy. The number and diversity of these is astounding. In the US there are currently approximately 1,000 federal agencies, with about 200 listed as independent or loosely attached. In the UK there are around 250 bodies with executive responsibilities of which 120 have regulatory functions, in Sweden there are about 100 and in the Republic of Ireland over 60.\(^{59}\) These regulators derive their governing legitimacy from their supposed expertise and tend to engage more with similar specialists across borders than with other agencies in their own state.\(^{60}\) One notable example is the Financial Action Task Force of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which brings together national regulators combating money laundering and terrorism financing.

All of this is not to say that the welfare state has disappeared, far from it, as Western states continue to struggle with high levels of social spending relative to GDP, in part associated with pension and healthcare commitments. But the provision of social policy has itself shifted in many cases towards more restrictive access criteria, greater reliance on public-private partnerships, and a reframing of inequality in terms of market-inclusion.\(^{61}\)


To link the discussion of the state and its transformation more concretely with
the study of regions and their interrelations with states, we now must turn to examine
an important yet often neglected aspect of statehood – territory and space. In an
influential article, John Agnew has urged political scientists to transcend the ‘territorial
trap’ – a set of three problematic assumptions about the relationship between state
and territory: that the state commands sovereignty over its entire territorial jurisdic-
tion; that political and economic life is separated neatly into domestic and interna-
tional realms; and that economy and society are defined by state borders.62
Agnew’s primary aim has been to point out that the contested processes through
which territorially configured political-economic formations have been produced
and transformed historically has been often ignored by students of International
Relations, thus making them also blind to current transformations in these.63

Drawing on Lefebvre, Brenner and Elden argue:

[T]erritory represents a historically specific political form of (produced) space – territorial
space – whose precise conditions of possibility, contours and consequences require careful
excavation, historicization, and theorization. In Lefebvre’s analysis, therefore, territory is
a particular form rather than a general one. As such it is comprehensible only through its
relation to the state and processes of statecraft.64

Lefebvre specifically examined the production of the national territory along with
the development of capitalism in Western Europe during the period of post-war
high Fordism. The important point, however, is that territory is continually pro-
duced and reproduced. There is no ‘initial moment that creates a framework or
container within which future struggles are played out’.65 Similarly, Poulantzas has
also asserted that the boundaries of the state ‘do not exist prior to the unification
of that which they structure.’66 Territory is rather produced/reproduced through
both state action and social and political struggle. Importantly, the production/reproduction of state territorial space can only be understood as an ongoing process.
Therefore, ‘state territorial strategies are distinguished by their goal of mobilizing
state institutions to shape and reshape inherited territorial structurations of political-
economic life, including those of state institutions themselves’.67 This means that state
territorial strategies are also constrained by existing institutional arrangements, such
as established international borders and international law, which in themselves are
manifestations of earlier, contested processes of territorialisation.

Combining these ideas about state territoriality with the earlier discussion on
social forces and their struggles in the transformation of the state, Glassman argues
that social forces under capitalism are inclined to internationalise due to capitalism’s
expansionist tendencies, and that with the internationalisation of capital comes the
(contested and uneven) internationalisation of the state. This is not to say that state
power is no longer territorialised, of course, but to point out that the territorial
dimension of the state is not natural, static, or homogenous across functional, insti-
tutional, and territorial spaces and that the state’s transformation has a particular

62 Agnew, ‘The Territorial Trap’.
63 Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden, ‘Henri Lefebvre on State, Space, Territory’, International Political
64 Brenner and Elden, ‘Henri Lefebvre on State, Space, Territory’, p. 363, emphasis in original.
65 Ibid., p. 367.
66 Poulantzas, State, Power, Socialism, p. 105.
political-economic logic, potentially leading to the development of various forms of regional governance.\(^{68}\)

There is nothing new in saying that the transnationalisation of capital is an important driver of regionalisation and regionalism.\(^ {69}\) The point, however, is that this process may not necessarily lead to the agglomeration of governance at a higher level, as in supranational institutions, but could be manifested in struggles across the state’s institutional spaces over the precise demarcation of ‘national’ and ‘regional’ governance. These struggles may be missed by observers focusing on regional governance ‘above’ the state because they take the state as a given.\(^ {70}\)

Inasmuch as the territorial dimensions of the state are produced through social and political conflict, the same could be said for other scales – local, regional, etc. – and their interrelations. The construction and development of scaled forms of governance – whether in the shape of supranational institutions or regional regulatory spaces within the state – is in other words part of a political project to establish particular forms of political rule.

It is here that political geography provides us with the tools to make sense of and compare the politics of regionalisation. David Harvey has highlighted the contradiction between the fixity and mobility of different kinds of capital and actors as crucial for understanding the spatial dimensions of the relationship between capitalist development and class relations.\(^ {71}\) Drawing on Harvey’s argument, Gough claims that strategies of scale-shifting ‘can be understood as mediations of fundamental contradictions of spatial accumulation. Shifts in the scale of governance then appear as means for shifting the balance within these tensions by using scaled institutions and economic processes.’\(^ {72}\) Though the emphasis here is not on capitalist development \textit{per se}, it remains true that the emergence of regional modes of governance is related to the attempt of actors to shift the governance of particular issues beyond the previous scope of national governance and in some cases beyond the institutions of the national state in order to secure their interests \textit{vis-à-vis} other social and political forces. Lillie, for example, draws our attention to the fluid and contested nature of the distinction between ‘onshore’ and ‘offshore’ production. The latter increasingly means a reterritorialisation of the very same physical spaces, as a way of promoting the interests of capital against organised labour, as labour is typically constrained by institutional arrangements at the national level.\(^ {73}\)

But scale-shifting does not always reflect the interests of capital. The increased toughening of environmental standards in many developing countries, for example, is related to international and transnational efforts to link environmental degradation there to global or regional concerns, such as climate change or food security.

\(^{70}\) Hameiri and Jayasuriya, ‘Regulatory Regionalism and the Dynamics of Territorial Politics’.
\(^{71}\) David Harvey, \textit{The Limits to Capital} (London: Verso, 2006 [1982]).
But here too the politics of scale is central. For example, the Indonesian government has for several years cited national sovereignty to resist the ratification of regional forest governance standards, designed to prevent the recurrent haze problem associated with illegal land-clearing practices in Indonesia, which are largely perpetrated by politically connected corporations.\textsuperscript{74} This is despite the haze’s clearly regional scope and adverse effect on the wellbeing of affected populations in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. On the other hand, the Indonesian government’s pledge to ratify regional governance standards in exchange for more stringent regulation of illegal logs from Indonesia coming into Singapore and Malaysia has to-date been ignored by the Singaporean and Malaysian governments.

The distinction between ‘national’ and ‘regional’ is hence not clear cut – something which scholars of European regionalism have understood for some time – but is constructed and reconstructed through conflict. In fact, the location of the boundaries between these levels is precisely at stake in the development of regional modes of governance. There are, however, at least two ways, captured by the notion of ‘multilevel governance’, in which multiple governance scales could be organised.\textsuperscript{75} Hooghe and Marks distinguish between two ideal-types of multilevel governance. Type I refers to a hierarchical arrangement of exclusive, general and territorialised units, akin to federalism. The assumption in much of the literature on regionalism is that regional arrangements are a level of supranational governance above states, resembling Hooghe and Marks’ Type I. Type II multilevel governance, according to Hooghe and Marks, refers to a constellation of functional, problem-solving, task-specific jurisdictions. Here regional governance takes the form of functionally defined jurisdictions, in which territorial spaces – national, subnational, and regional – are entangled.\textsuperscript{76} A typical example for this form of regional governance is represented by the Mekong water management project of the Asian Development Bank.\textsuperscript{77} A sharp distinction between Type I and Type II regionalism should be avoided, however, because functional arrangements are not post-territorial, inasmuch as regional formations that are apparently intergovernmental and made up of easily identifiable national territorial units are not natural either but the product of historical processes of state-formation and territorialisation.

The hierarchical ordering of the various scales is best captured by the notion of ‘boundary control’,\textsuperscript{78} a concept whose origins are in the study of territorial politics. Territorial politics starts from the assumption that if political units of varying scales – cities, subnational regions, states – are contained within each other as a kind of Russian Doll, then the issue of what is governed at what level, and by whom, is not a given but the outcome of ongoing contestation. Gibson used boundary control to refer to the measures employed by authoritarian local governors in the Latin


\textsuperscript{76} Hooghe and Marks, ‘Unraveling the Central State, But How?’


American states he studied, to fend off attempts by democratic central governments to encroach on their powers.

Boundary control has a somewhat different meaning in the context of regional governance, since territorial politics here is typically not about a contestation between the governments of established political units within a single state, as it is generally understood in territorial politics. Rather, it could be about the creation of new spatial and territorial constructs that may vary according to the issues concerned and the forces involved. Regionalisation could approximate Type I multilevel governance and in these situations boundary control resembles Gibson’s original meaning. Yet, when used in Type II situations, in which there are no clear hierarchies of scale, boundary control often involves defining territorial boundaries, usually around a particular issue or problem that traverses state borders, not just defending them.

So far, I have outlined a theory of region-making that draws on state theory and political geography and which provides the tools for comparing the incredible diversity of regional projects around the world. From this perspective, regionalism is understood in the context of broader struggles over power and resources, which shape the territorial, spatial, and institutional nature of statehood, as well as its ideological representation to those subject to its power. An important caveat is due, however. It is not essential for state transformation to lead to a regionalisation of state power and the governance structures through which it is exercised. It is conceivable, to take a particularly important example, for public authority to entirely break down – a situation typical of so-called failed states. The picture provided above is far from exhaustive, of course, and more research, particularly comparative, is required to draw out the precise links between coalitions, states, and regions. To this end it is also important, however, to develop our methodological tools.

**Method: Mechanisms and comparative regionalism**

As we have seen in the first section, several leading students of regionalism argue that regions should be studied as never-ceasing processes not to be evaluated against a benchmark of formal institutionalisation. Nevertheless, none apart from Warleigh-Lack has indicated precisely what studying regions as process would look like, and, as argued above, Warleigh-Lack’s approach is limited by a methodology that is not particularly suited to the study of historical processes. Covariational or correlational methodologies essentially aim to find a link, often statistical (though not in Warleigh-Lack’s case), between dependent and independent variables and therefore have weaknesses for examining long-term and complex processes of change. This is because isolating the variables and establishing their relative dependence and independence is exceptionally difficult in these situations, a problem which scholars of regionalism have been acutely aware of.

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It is clear by now from the theoretical discussion above that this author agrees regionalisation could only be understood as a historical process. The question remains, however, how to compare processes. There are two important aspects to this. The first is case study selection – what does a ‘process’ case study look like? The second refers to the tools used in comparing these case studies – how should we study regionalisation processes?

The issue of case study selection has been given a good treatment by De Lombaerde et al.:

it is important to distinguish between regions and regional organisations as ‘cases’, and what constitutes a ‘case’ from the perspective of the empirical research set-up. One particular region or regional organisation can easily deliver (or be disaggregated into) several ‘cases’ depending on the research questions that are addressed.82

These authors advocate matching case studies to the research problem and chosen conceptual and theoretical framework. Not every comparison is worthwhile, they claim, but the variety of case studies extends well beyond the formal regional organisations or geographically proximate regional groupings. So a case study is not necessarily ‘East Asian regionalism’, or ‘ASEAN’, but could be a particular regional regulatory regime. Indeed, we may even choose to compare regional governance projects in the same part of the world at different historical periods. But how are we to determine which comparisons are worth making? In particular, what tools are available that avoid the problem of predefining the dependent and independent variables?

I argue that mechanisms are particularly suited for this purpose. Mechanisms are ‘events that change relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations’, while combinations or sequences of mechanisms constitute processes.83 Mechanismic explanations aim to ‘step away from the description of regularities to their explanation’.84 Therefore, propositions about mechanisms aim to specify causal chains by ‘identifying the processes through which [a given social phenomenon] is generated’.85

The starting point of the search for mechanisms operating in a specific field is always ‘an observed or suspected regularity; a correlation; or a puzzling event, structure, or process’.86 However, if mechanisms are to explain phenomena or relationships, this means that the latter logically predate the former – the ‘what’ precedes the ‘how’;87 we need to know what we are looking at before we explain how we got there. It is therefore the interaction between mechanism and context that shapes outcomes, not mechanisms per se.88 In turn, understanding the context, defined as the relevant aspects of a setting where various initial conditions may lead to an outcome of a given scope and meaning via causal mechanisms,89 is impossible without the guidance of theory.90 Theory is hence crucial to mechanistic explanations

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82 De Lombaerde et al., ‘Problems and Divides in Comparative Regionalism’, p. 32, emphasis in original.
86 Ibid., p. 253.
87 Ibid.
89 See Pawson, ‘Middle Range Realism’.
and this is why the discussion on theory precedes the discussion on method in this article.

The observed or suspected regularity at play here is the observation that despite their incredible divergence, regional processes of various kinds all involve shifts in the scale in which public power is exercised, and the governance relations in which state agencies are involved, away from the national scale to other scales, below, above or beside it, and even in some cases into the hands of non-governmental actors. Söderbaum has correctly identified this fundamental similarity between micro- and macro-regions, but without placing it in a theoretical context as this article, which allows for explaining the forces driving and shaping such transformations. It is therefore the process through which governance is rescaled that is at the core of the regionalisation problematique, raising the core questions of what mechanisms shape the rescaling of political rule, how, and why.

Identifying the full range of mechanisms associated with regionalisation is impossible in one article, though the above mentioned boundary control is a particularly important one for any project involving reterritorialisation. To provide some examples, however, we can draw on Hameiri and Jayasuriya who have elsewhere highlighted three interrelated mechanisms as particularly pertinent for the development of regulatory regionalism – meta-governance, functional specialisation, and ‘de-bounded’ risk management.

Meta-governance is a crucial mechanism for managing the relationship between overlapping political arenas. It refers to the ‘governance of governance’ – putting in place procedures, guidelines, and rules for the regulation of governance arrangements that also often include non-governmental actors. The rising importance of meta-governance is associated with processes of state disaggregation and regulatory forms of statehood. These have not so much weakened the state, but have led to the realignment of power within bureaucracies. With actual governance increasingly diffuse and located beyond the state apparatus, meta-governance has tended to become increasingly concentrated in the core executive of states and international organisations. Meta-governance plays a critical role in determining who gets to exercise regulatory power and on what basis.

A notable example for meta-governance in regulatory regionalism is the EU’s open method of coordination (OMC). The OMC essentially organises the rules and procedures constituting the relationship between national and European institutions, for example through the European employment programme or the Bologna process. It sets broad policy goals and benchmarks for various policy domains among EU member-states, as well as procedural conditions and mechanisms for consultation and participation with non-governmental actors and the private sector.

Functional specialisation is another important mechanism through which conflict is regionalised. Functional jurisdictions, like the Mekong project mentioned above, typically traverse established political boundaries and require the active participation of subnational and national-level agencies in governing, as well as

93 Hameiri and Jayasuriya, ‘Regulatory Regionalism and the Dynamics of Territorial Politics’.
a range of non-state and private actors. In principle, functional specialisation constitutes efforts to exercise control over boundaries by creating a distinction, which itself is highly politically and ideologically laden, between ‘political’ and ‘technical’ issues. More specifically this mechanism is associated with attempts to limit the scope of the political, which is associated with territorially institutionalised forms of political organisation like the state.

Finally, in recent times one of the most important mechanisms for taking state power beyond the national scale has involved the use of depictions of de-bounded risk, as well as the development of various transnational and international governance arrangements to manage such risks. The concept of de-bounded risk, popularised by Ulrich Beck, refers to potential dangers that are low probability but high consequence and are not contained by political borders or knowable timeframes. Such risks are said to defy conventional forms of social and private insurance and are therefore beyond the capacity of individual governments to address. Whether we take such risks as real or view these depictions as part of a political project that aims to establish a particular kind of political rule, in which technical and managerial expertise is dominant, the notion of de-bounded risk has been central to the development of several new modes of regional governance.

For example, the current concern with failed states, and the associated proliferation of international state-building interventions, has been largely driven by the perception that weak governance increases the risk that security problems will emerge from within the territories of so-called failed states and eventually come to threaten states and societies miles away. Indeed, the 2002 US National Security Strategy stated plainly that ‘America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones’. The European Neighbourhood Policy, for instance, is driven by a similar rationale of promoting effective governance and economic development in the states surrounding the EU, as a way of mitigating the future emergence and migration of non-traditional security problems into the EU.

Comparing regional governance in Asia and Europe

In this part, I briefly demonstrate the utility of the approach to comparative regionalism elucidated above by examining the changing nature of regional governance in Asia and Europe. The aim is to explain a puzzling similarity – that despite their supposed difference and vastly divergent historical pathways, we now see various forms of regulatory regionalism becoming increasingly abundant and important in both Asia and Europe.

It is often argued that regionalism in Europe is highly formalised and legalised, while regionalism in Asia is informal and state-dominated. This discrepancy is explained by Katzenstein as stemming from the different approach taken by the US to these regions in the post-war era, as well as by the nature of state structures. Whereas in Europe the US sought to cultivate multilateral institutions like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as a bulwark against Soviet expansion, in Asia American governments preferred a system of bilateral arrangements that

tied various Asian states, particularly Japan, directly to the US. At the same time, Katzenstein argues that the ‘non-Weberian’ states of Asia, where state-society relations are not based on the rule of law, are not susceptible to the kind of legalised regionalism we see in Europe. Another eminent commentator, Amitav Acharya, disagrees with Katzenstein’s proclivity to view US power as the determining factor in Asian regionalism, but essentially concurs with his depiction of regionalism in Asia as relatively informal, state-dominated and infused with norms of non-interference.97

More recently, critics have pointed that the perception of European regionalism as highly institutionalised and legalised is only partly accurate and increasingly less so,98 both because informal relations and governance arrangements have always been an important part of European regionalism and because the nature of European regionalism has itself changed in recent decades through new modes of governance like the OMC.99 What is perhaps more puzzling however, is the emergence, though in a more limited and tentative form, of new modes of regional governance in Asia, some of which are apparently inconsistent with common perceptions of what Asian regionalism is like.100 Particularly in the wake of the Asian economic crisis we have witnessed the development of regional regulatory instruments, such as the Chiang Mai Initiative and the Asian Bond Market Initiative, previously thought unthinkable in Asia. These have been accompanied by the establishment of regional surveillance networks meant to assess the governance capacities of member-states.101 In both Asia and Europe, despite their differences, similar mechanisms such as meta-governance and functional specialisation have been used in the establishment of new modes of regional governance, mainly aimed at managing transnational problems of various kinds, such as financial flows and non-traditional security challenges. Though the specific political and/or institutional outcomes may diverge the presence of similar mechanisms indicates that there are important similarities in the transformation of the processes themselves. Why do we see similar processes of regionalisation taking place in Asia and Europe?

One way of responding would be that policymakers and practitioners everywhere have had to contend with the problems of interconnectedness and that regional governance reflects this challenge. This does not account, however, for differences where those exist. For example, Caballero-Anthony argues that in the area of infectious disease management, a discourse of securitisation has taken root among ASEAN states that is yet to be translated into real regional action. This is despite the fact that infectious diseases, such as avian flu and SARS, are clearly transnational and potentially very harmful.102 Yet, significant developments have occurred

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97 Acharya, ‘The Emerging Regional Architecture of World Politics’.
98 See Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond, ‘Across the EU-New Regionalism Frontier’.
100 Hameiri and Jayasuriya, ‘Regulatory Regionalism and the Dynamics of Territorial Politics’.
in regional financial governance, an area hitherto thought as highly resistant to change in a region of developmental states.\textsuperscript{103}

A more satisfactory explanation could instead be provided by examining the drivers of the ‘open regionalism’ of the 1990s in Asia and its subsequent demise, and comparing this process to that of the relative decline of post-war ‘embedded liberalism’ regionalism in Europe. Jayasuriya argues that the open regionalism of trade liberalisation in Asia in the 1980s and 1990s, most clearly manifested in the formation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1989, was driven by the dominance of a domestic regime of ‘embedded mercantilism’ in most East Asian states.\textsuperscript{104} Embedded mercantilism rested on a set of trade-offs between a competitive and relatively efficient tradable sector and a non-tradable sector dominated by powerful cartels, usually with direct links to the state. In most East Asian states the profits generated by the export-oriented, often foreign-owned, export industries were used to finance the patronage sustaining the powerful coalitions that controlled the non-exportable sectors of the economy. An important aspect of this segmented political economy was the prevalence of a bank-led rather than financial markets-led economic development model, which allowed national bureaucratic and political elites to direct credit allocation, often to the politically connected.\textsuperscript{105} In turn, the international strategy pursued by regional governments, of trade liberalisation through open regionalism, was aimed at opening up markets for national exports while shielding the domestic political economy from disruptions. From this perspective open regionalism ‘is not so much a strategy of economic liberalization as a regional regime of political economy that encompasses a set of institutions, domestic coalitional structures and international strategies.’\textsuperscript{106}

The regional project of open regionalism was undermined by the crisis of embedded mercantilism manifested in the 1997-8 Asian economic shock. Indeed, APEC’s response to the crisis was widely seen as inadequate and its reputation subsequently never quite recovered.\textsuperscript{107} The challenge to embedded mercantilism at that time could largely be attributed to the growing imbalance between the tradable and non-tradable sectors within regional states, precipitated by their economies’ increasing financial deregulation in the 1990s and the availability of large amounts of ‘hot money’ in global markets. Sustaining the voracious cartels dominating the non-tradable sector required high levels of profitability from exports and in turn massive foreign investments in non-tradable sectors were fed by investors’ unrealistic expectations of quick and easy returns; expectations which were generated by the high economic growth rates the region’s export-led economies had been experiencing. Financial deregulation in the context of ‘crony capitalism’, whereby politically connected cartels had managed to capture important parts of the state’s policymaking apparatus, made it increasingly difficult for bureaucrats to intervene to reverse the flow of ‘hot money’ into speculative activities in real estate and other non-tradable

\textsuperscript{103} Rethel, ‘The New Financial Development Paradigm and Asian Bond Markets’.
\textsuperscript{105} Rethel, ‘The New Financial Development Paradigm and Asian Bond Markets’.
\textsuperscript{106} Jayasuriya, ‘Embedded Mercantilism and Open Regionalism’, p. 339.
sectors. Under these circumstances, a shock on the magnitude of 1997–8 seems to have been almost inevitable. In any case, one of the main casualties of the crisis had been the open regionalism project in the Asia-Pacific.108

In the wake of the crisis, the dominant social forces associated with embedded mercantilism have fought to maintain their position pursuing a range of strategies and have had uneven success in this endeavour. As in the era of open regionalism, regionalisation, or resistance to it, has been an important element in this political project of survival, as well as in the strategies of contending coalitions. Yet, in contrast with the pre-crisis situation, pathways out of the crisis have been far more diverse, leading to a greater variety of governance projects across both national and functional lines.109 In particular, the social and political instability wrought by the crisis, which led to the collapse of Indonesia’s long-standing New Order regime, and the perception that regional states could not battle financial contagion alone, combined with resentment over Asia’s treatment at the hands of the American government and the International Monetary Fund during the crisis to encourage the development of various forms of monetary regionalism and regional risk management.110 In tandem, bilateral, or other free trade agreements (FTAs) have mushroomed in Asia as the multilateral trade liberalisation agenda decayed. But rather than being merely about trade liberalisation these FTAs have given increasing consideration to commercial regulatory provisions embodying specific rules on intellectual property, investment, government procurement, competition policy, and other areas of commercial practice.111

In Europe, the political project that had led to the establishment of the European Community and later the EU was also fundamentally linked to efforts to buttress a domestic political regime. But rather than Asia’s embedded mercantilism, which was associated with powerful crony-capitalist elites, in Europe it was a regime of ‘embedded liberalism’ – the Keynesian-welfarist domestic compact between labour and capital – that had to be protected.112 The protection of domestic capital and labour required a high degree of national control over the economy and, as Ruggie famously shows, international institutions in the post-war era reflected this imperative by, for example, imposing restrictions on capital movements and regulating currency exchange. The domestic basis of the European project led Alan Milward – an intergovernmentalist – to argue of a ‘European rescue of the nation-state’.113

Yet, post-war embedded liberalism came under strain during the stagflation decade of the 1970s, leading to the rising prominence of neoliberal ideology and policy prescriptions, as well as to greater assertiveness on the part of capital to

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108 Jayasuriya, ‘Embedded Mercantilism and Open Regionalism’.
improve declining profitability, in part by attacking the post-war industrial relations \textit{status quo}. In this context, the rescaling of governance and the emergence of new modes of regional and national regulation are partly related to attempts to circumvent the highly entrenched and institutionalised power of labour in European states. But more substantially, the Europeanisation process has tended to reduce the scope of issues governed through the institutions of representative democracy and the capacity of citizens to mobilise politically to advance alternative agendas.\textsuperscript{114} Europeanisation is not a one-dimensional process of pro-capitalist regionalisation, however. Indeed, it has recently been argued that there has been a ‘regulatory rescue of the welfare state’. Mabbett claims that regulatory governance – non-majoritarian, technical and supranational – has in some cases been used as a means of enhancing the robustness of the welfare state \textit{vis-à-vis} the pressures exerted by market integration, while nevertheless still militating against solidaristic values and politics and biasing policy towards the promotion of efficiency.\textsuperscript{115}

As in Asia, we can clearly see that the growing, though uneven, scope of regulatory regionalism in Europe also marks a contested transformation of the political projects of state and region making. Fundamentally, in both Asia and Europe the rise of regulatory regionalism is a manifestation of responses by dominant social and political forces to globalisation and concurrent shifts in national and regional political economies. Though the historical sources of embedded liberalism and embedded mercantilism are very different, in both cases regional governance was initially associated with an effort to protect a domestic political project. The undoing of these regimes, in Europe through the slow-burning crisis of the welfare state, which is perhaps now coming to a head with the sovereign debt crisis of many European governments, and in Asia through the economic shock of the late 1990s, has also challenged and changed the nature of regional governance. In both cases, regionalisation, now mainly in the form of regulatory regionalism, has been used to shape the opportunities available to various actors and coalitions. In both Europe and Asia, one of the more intriguing aspects of the decline of the hitherto dominant domestic regimes is the increased blurring of the distinction between domestic and external, as more complex modes of regional governance emerge.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The study of regions and of comparative regionalism in particular has been plagued by an abundance of concepts and usages that are often said to inhibit comparison. Despite considerable development over several decades, a prominent observer has recently argued that more needs to be done to develop our theoretical understanding of regionalism.\textsuperscript{116} In this article, it has been argued that what is required is a closer integration of the study of regions and relevant work in state theory and political geography. In particular, insights from these literatures pertaining to the relationship between state power and scale allow for both explaining divergence in


\textsuperscript{116} Hettne, ‘Beyond the “New” Regionalism’.
regional projects by locating these within a historical context of state development and transformation, and for identifying the forces shaping regionalisation. The article also outlined a methodology for comparative regionalism that focuses on the mechanisms of change in the process of regionalisation. By identifying the mechanisms at play, it is possible to identify similar trends in regional governance, even when at the formal organisational and institutional levels few similarities exist.

While this approach will need to be developed through further comparative research, one of its key strengths is that it is suitable for a wide variety of comparative exercises. Because it does not start from an assumption of methodological nationalism, it is not only useful for comparing macro-regions but also for analysing and comparing the development of different regional governance regimes operating within the same geographic locations. It thus allows for a better elucidation of the forces shaping and resisting contemporary forms of political rule, whether national, regional, or otherwise.