CONSTRUCTIVISM AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION THEORIES. THE APPLICATION TO MERCOSUR (June, 2008)

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to provide a critical approach to the issue of regional integration, one of the most important subjects over the last two decades and currently one of the leading debates that are taking place in the South. Although the importance of regional integration –given its correlation to the process of pacific change in international relations–, it seems that there is no satisfactory theoretical explanation about regionalism. First of all in this paper, I propose some conceptual differences in order to limit and clarify the regional integration field. Later, I try to present a summary revision of the theories of regional integration with the aim of simulating a dialogue among them and pointing out their respective criticisms of each other. From the classical theories such as neofunctionalism, transactionalism, neoliberal institutionalism and neorealism to more recently approaches such as new regionalism approach, structuralism and constructivism, I highlight their main postulates and contributions to this field of the discipline. Furthermore, the regional integration process in South America -mainly Mercosur- is interconnected with the theoretical review in order to underline the shortcomings and silences of theories with respect to this issue. On this basis, we observe how traditional theories do not success in explaining events such as the rapprochement between Brazil and Argentina in 2002. Finally, I propose the use of a constructivist approach, promoting the ideas of “identity” and “culture”, in order to add in-depth understanding to the picture of the regional integration, especially in the Mercosur case.

KEY WORDS: Regional integration, “new regionalism”, Mercosur, South America, constructivism.
I. The regional integration: basic notions

Regional integration processes have generated a high interest in the International Relations discipline since the decade of the 50’s, but this interest has re-emerged particularly since the 80’s due to the success of the European Union and attempts of imitation in other world regions; for example, the Latin American “open regionalism” and the “ASEAN” geopolitical approach.

It must be noted that when we talk about regional integration, we mean “a set of policies by one or more states designed to promote the emergence of a cohesive regional unit, which dominates the pattern of relations between the states of that region and the rest of the world, and which forms the organizing basis for policy within the region across a range of issues”\(^1\). But, we can distinguish among several levels of regionalism, from a community awareness (soft or informal regionalism) to the international/regional treaties (hard or formal regionalism), although both would share the same objectives\(^2\).

In any case, globalization and the search for answers to its consequences are the main reasons why the regional integration is now at the center of the academic debate in the South (Payne, 2004: 16-7). The “new regionalism”, understood as a theoretical position (see below, p. 13), has been created\(^3\) to address the issues of globalization and, in particular, from the perspective of the South against the risk of marginalization in the context of globalization.


\(^3\) As Angela Meyer (2006: 300) reminds us, the concept of “new regionalism” has been created by the researchers of the Department of Peace and Development Research at Goteborg University, led by Bjorn Hettne and Fredrik Soderbaum.
Thus, the “new regionalism” –in this case, understood as a phenomenon- can be defined by a more open trade policy, the pressure on the Latin-American economies entering the global economy through bigger flows of trade and direct investment, a broader multi-thematic approach, and the emergence of preferential integration processes North-South among countries with large differences in development level and per capita GNP. This preponderant approach in regional integration literature shows us how economic relations and trade insertion in global economy have become the main point, which divert away from the possibility to understand the subject from different academic disciplines apart from the economic one.

Another conceptual specification that should be noted from the beginning is the difference between regionalism and regionalization. Although some times they are used indistinctly, they have different meanings. Thus, “we will understand regionalism as a project and regionalization as a process”. Following this classification from the International Political Economy group at the Sheffield University, led by Gamble and Payne, “regionalism would include the political initiatives of government members in order to strengthen political and economic cooperation among states and actors of the region […] Regionalization would mean the whole integration process that takes place inside one or several geographic regions; this issue implies the strengthening of relations among state and non-state actors of the region, but, setting apart from regionalism, neither the political aspect nor the institutional character of these processes are always present or necessary”.

Having specified these conceptual points in this first part, I will make a short review of the main regional integration theories, both classical (part II) and critical (part III). And finally (part IV), I will

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4 El “nuevo regionalismo” y el área de libre comercio de las Américas: un enfoque menos indulgente, Roberto Bouzas, in Revista de la CEPAL, número 85, abril 2005, pp. 7-18.

5 El nuevo regionalismo latinoamericano en los años noventa, Josep Ibáñez, in Revista Electrónica de Estudios Internacionales, 2000, p.3; my translation from Spanish.

6 Ib idem, p.3-4; my translation from Spanish.
propose some tentative conclusions and future research trends in regional integration.

**II. From the functionalism to the intergovernmentalism: a quick view over the classical theories.**

The academic approach to the regional integration has come, mainly, from liberalism and its concern with cooperation and its connexion with economic explanations. “The first enunciation was the **functionalism** of David Mitrany” (Cox, 1996 [1992]: 506) that, even before the Second World War, maintained that the material need a solution for living (low politics) by technical experts of international agencies could facilitate the cooperation among statesmen to solve security and power conflicts (high politics). His liberal point of view meant that the increase of technological progress would make the state’s capacity to control all the security tasks inefficient and, therefore, the international cooperation was turning essential. Indeed, there was a paradox in that the capacity of the nation state had been surpassed yet at the same time that the regional integration process should be commanded by the state.  

This first attempt to explain regional integration was completed by the **neofunctionalism** of Ernst Haas. He tried to strengthen the functionalism argumentation and to challenge the two dominant mainstreams of the International Relations discipline. It is important to notice that this approach arose at the dawn of the European construction, and as a driving force and theoretical basis for the processes that were taking place in the 50’s. An important peculiarity of neofunctionalism is the complete break with the realist static picture, regarding the sense of movement that increasing interdependence in several areas generates a “spill over effect” in other areas. As Haas defends, fidelities start to change and the idea of a


8 “Neofunctionalism was developed explicitly to challenge the two theories of IR dominant in the 1950s, classical realism and idealism”, *The Uniting of Europe*, Ernst Haas, 2004, p. XIV.

9 As we could appreciate later, one of the most powerful criticism against realism is about the lack of dynamism, that is, the incapacity to explain changes of interests or motivations to act because of it is believed that these interests are permanent and prefixed.
region understood with more powerful institutions –or even supranational ones- then becomes real. This process, which is due to an ideational ontology –that will be a strong influence for the constructivists, as we will see-, implies that the positive outcomes obtained by the spill over effect will impulse the evaluation changes and the statesmen motivation to also integrate issues in other areas.

Another important aspect of Haas contribution over the functionalism of Mitrany concerns the plurality of actors. They are not only statesmen who support the integration process, but, according to Haas, also all the society elites. Thus, the characteristic rationality associated to statesmen becomes blurred among a plurality of actors who search for the same objective –integration-, but through different strategies.

This approach, notably focused on the study of European integration process, has been refuted for its lack of explanations for the French position under De Gaulle regime and its euro-sclerosis in the 60’s. Against these critics, Haas defends that his argument is a form of approach, and not a theory in that it can neither understand the reality in a holistic way nor predict future events. At the same time, after the strengthened European integration process in the 80’s, neofunctionalism has re-emerged bringing Haas the opportunity to sharpen his line of reasoning. Haas has pointed out that the spill over effect is not automatic in some types of economic law but relies on the ability to readdress and change loyalties and attitudes among the states of the same region, and finally to promote regional integration among them.

Neofunctionalism has also been criticized for its European specificity. At the end, neofunctionalism could be understood more as a European historical description approach than as a regional integration theory with a world dimension. Even Haas –and Schmitter- have limited the possibility to apply these preconceptions in other regions with other particularities. Thus, it seems that the spill over effect does

10 “Haas built the idea of spill over not on economic determinism, but on changes in the attitudes and behaviour of governments, parties, and, especially, labour and business interest groups. His key conclusion was that “group pressure will spill over into the federal sphere and thereby add to the integrative impulse””. *The Uniting of Europe*, Ernst Haas, 2004, p. X.
not work successfully in integration processes where the institutional level has been weak, as is the case in Mercosur. Indeed, the Mercosur process is not currently directed to have supranational institutions and is notably intergovernmental –in the sense that almost all decisions are taken directly by the presidents and/or ministries of foreign affairs or economy, but not by regional institutions-. Following this line, we could observe that the Mercosur process would suffer too many problems to channel the spill over effect and the functional spread among varied sectors. This fact implies an important hole and a lack of explanation in this approach, even if the ideational prism and the idea of a plurality of actors acting as a driving force could be extrapolated out of the European case to the South American reality. In conclusion, it seems that the neofunctionalism of Haas is not able to explain by itself some events that have taken place in Mercosur, i.e. the acceleration of the signing of the Asunción Treaty in 1991 because of the presidential impulse of Menem and Collor, or the unilateral Brazilian devaluation in 1999 that generated a trade conflict intra-Mercosur. However, the neofunctionalism theory can be very useful in understanding the rapprochement between Sarney and Alfonsín in the 80’s and subsequently, the nuclear disarmament and finally the elimination of the risk of war in South America.

The security communities approach or transactionalism of Karl Deutsch could be framed as a position close to neofunctionalism but focused specially on order and security. Furthermore, the transactionalism implies a challenge to statocentric theories as realism, insofaras it brings the possibility of the existence of driving forces other than the ones coming from the government itself\textsuperscript{11}. Transactionalism is characterized by the conception of the integration as a process throughout which the evaluations and societal behaviours based in political decisions get modified. Thus, as Deutsch claimed, “[e]arly in the course of the integrative process, a psychological “no-war” community often also develops. War among the prospective partners comes to be considered as illegitimate; serious preparations for it no longer command popular support; and even if some of the prospective partner countries find themselves on opposite sides in some larger international conflict, they conduct

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\textsuperscript{11} “Integration, then, is a relationship among units in which they are mutually interdependent and jointly produce system properties which they would separately lack […] Political integration is the integration of political actor or political units, such as individuals, groups, municipalities, regions, or countries, in regard to their political behavior”, \textit{The Analysis of international relations}, Karl Deutsch. 1968, p.159.
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themselves so as to keep actual mutual hostilities and damage to a minimum. The security community approach is then a challenge to realism; in spite of explaining peace just as a consequence of power balance or latent war, he suggested also psychological elements and ideas concerning identity as possible causes and explanations for cooperation and, at the end of the day, the formation of a security community. In other words “in short, Deutsch claimed that those state that dwell in a security community had created not simply a stable order but, in fact, a stable peace.

While talking about security communities, Deutsch distinguishes between two models. On the one hand, the amalgamated communities, where different states join together around one regional centre. In these cases, a supranational entity will arise. On the other hand, and more interesting for the regional integration literature, the pluralistic communities, where sovereign and independent units agree to put together some kind of decision making process and, notably, renunciate the use of force to solve their disputes. Apart from this distinction, the main point in Deutsch’s argumentation is the ideational nuance that he introduces: the interaction among the diverse members of the community produces an increasing transnational solidarity and subsequently, is understood like a sense of community, a “we-feeling”, a concept that constructivists will retake, as we will see later.

This idea of “we-feeling” is very present in South America after the identity construction between Argentinean and Brazilian people in the 80’s. The end of both dictatorships generated the self-perception as democratic societies, as democracy and human rights developers. This almost perfect understanding between both positions could be compared to Deutsch’s “psychology community of non belligerence”, that subsequently could be the origin of a South American security community. Thereby, Deutsch’s contribution is useful to analyse the security concept from an ideational point of view –and

13 Deutsch pointed out as one of the four main tasks of integration “(4) gaining a new self-image and role identity”. *The Analysis of international relations*, Karl Deutsch, 1968, p. 192.
not just material-, that give us the key to understand the period from the recovery of democracy in the
80’s to the elimination of the risk of war in the 90’s.

It could be worth pointing out the connexion between the security communities approach and the
democratic peace theory of Doyle. Michael Doyle also takes up again Kant’s thinking to state that
democracies do not go to war against themselves and consequently, the expansion of democracy all over
the world would facilitate the elimination of wars, i.e. would facilitate the emergence of more security
communities. To be honest, it is important to make the difference between Doyle’s theoretical
contribution and statesmen who have tried to apply this reasoning as a foreign policy with more or less
success. Even if this theory does not tackle the regional integration as a main character, it has been used
by some scholars as a way to explain cooperation among new democracies after dictatorship falls 15. For
this reason, it is interesting to handle its argumentations concerning regional integration -even when it is
not very useful- but avoid the risk of misunderstanding between democratic peace theory and security
communities.

The interdependency theory of Nye and Keohane takes Haas’ contributions related to institutions and,
at the same time, it searches to defy the realist theory predominant in the 70’s. In its earliest formulation
of 1977, the “complex interdependence theory” aspires to refute realism with the presentation of two
ideal types: realism and complex interdependence, that can be seen as a continuum where reality can be
placed 16. Thereby Keohane and Nye explain the international relations in the 70’s as characterized by an

15 In South American integration case, some democratic peace approaches have been used because many authors consider
the democratic transition in the 80’s as the key factor to the rapprochement between Argentina and Brazil. Against this
argument, even if it is not his main goal, authors as Gardini (Two critical passages on the road to Mercosur, Gian Luca
Gardini, Cambridge Review of International Affairs, vol. 18, issue 3, 2005, pp. 405-420) establishes the inflection point
between 1983 and 1985, that is, in an asymmetrical relation between an already democratic Argentina and a still
authoritarian Brazil.

16 “Bajo estas condiciones --que denominamos como las características de la interdependencia compleja-- se puede esperar
que la política mundial sea muy diferente de lo que es bajo las condiciones realistas [...] Sin embargo, no sostendremos
que la interdependencia compleja refleja fehacientemente la realidad política mundial. Por el contrario, tanto ella como la
representación realista son tipos ideales. Muchas situaciones caerán en algún lugar situado entre ambos extremos”, in
increasing interconnection between domestic and international affairs, what has been called “intermestic”. From this point of view, realist definition of states as billiard balls motivated by rational choice and national interest is not useful any more\textsuperscript{17}. Following this idea, they start to talk about transgovernmental networking and interstate relations out of the formal channels\textsuperscript{18}. It is also important to contextualize this theory within that time and be aware of implications of the 1973 economic crisis, which showed the interconnection among the whole national economies and the interdependence of all states on resources, notably, oil.

A little bit surprisingly, in \textit{Power and Interdependence Revisited}, written ten years later by the same authors, Keohane and Nye reduced their degree of confrontation or challenge against the realism and they assumed some realist postulates and tried to make a kind of collaboration to realism in order to create a broader realism or at least, to complement it. This position is adopted specially by Keohane—as he proved in other publications as \textit{Neorealism and its critics}—, while Nye focused his further research on soft power. One possible explanation for this reformulation of their perspective could be the appearance of \textit{Waltz’s Theory of International Politics} in 1979 and its suggestive reinforcement of realist postulates in the so-called structural realism or neorealism. In addition, the aggravation of international context and the second phase of the Cold War seemed to give force to realist interpretation in spite of complex interdependence theory formulations. In conclusion, Keohane and Nye are resituated in an intermediate place between realism and liberalism; or in their own words “our analysis linked realist and neorealist analysis to concerns of liberals with interdependence. Rather than viewing realist theory as an alternative to liberal interdependence theory, we regarded the two as necessary complements to one another”\textsuperscript{19}. Knowing the argumentative fortress of neorealism but conscious of its lack of explanation,

\textsuperscript{17} “Muchos de los más serios problemas de la interdependencia compleja resultan directamente de este desdibujamiento de la diferencia entre política interna y política exterior. La concepción de la política como si el mundo consistiera en estados semejantes a bolas de billar dirigidos por reyes filósofos no es demasiado útil”, in \textit{Poder e Interdependencia}, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, 1988 [1977], p.285.

\textsuperscript{18} “Necesitamos pensar a las organizaciones internacionales menos como instituciones y más como conjuntos de redes intergubernamentales y transgubernamentales asociadas a instituciones formales”, in \textit{Poder e Interdependencia}, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, 1988 [1977], p. 302.

they reformulated a synthesis or adaptation to neorealism\textsuperscript{20}, that put the emphasis on exchanges. These exchanges would generate a mutual dependency until weaving an interdependence network in which national and regional aspects were blurred. In any case, the thin line between the \textit{nationalness} and the \textit{regionalness}, kept on getting thinner because of the growing international institutions and their importance until they began talking in an “intermestic” way, i.e. the mixture and interconnection of both fields: domestic and international (\textbf{neoliberal institutionalism}).

Besides, their limitations -announced ten year after their \textit{opus magnum}- also concerned the complex interdependence consequences. The optimism showed in 1977 about the unleashing of cooperation processes among states becomes restricted. Cooperation is no longer understood as an inherent consequence of interdependence but the material capacities and power are replaced in the middle of the international relations among states; or in Keohane and Nye’s words: “In analyzing the politics of interdependence, we emphasized that interdependence would not necessarily lead to cooperation, nor did we assume that its consequences would automatically be benign in other respects. The key point was not that interdependence made power obsolete –far from it- but that patterns of interdependence and patterns of potential power resources in a given issue-area are closely related”\textsuperscript{21}.

To sum up, “from a neoliberal institutionalist point of view, the regional/interregional mechanisms are seen as channels for the collective solution for common problems –as, for example, obstacles to investor or socializing frames within which errant members can be brought into line with the dominant rules. This kind of approximation emphasizes the role of state agency and understands regionalization as a

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\textsuperscript{20} “We viewed our structural models as attempts to improve the ability of Realist or neo-Realist analysis to account for international regime change: we saw ourselves as adapting Realism, and attempting to go beyond it, rather than rejecting it”, \textit{Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond}, Robert O Keohane, \textit{Neorealism and its critics}, 1986, p. 160.

\end{flushright}
means to negotiate intrastate demands in a context of external forces in transformation”.

On the other hand, the other component of the discipline mainstream, neorealism, has not been too interested in regional integration. “Waltz updates realist analysis by paying attention to the systemic level of analysis [...] For Waltz the international system is characterized by anarchy rather than hierarchy. It is composed of units that are formally and functionally equal (states) and the key variable is the distribution of capacities across units (a system level attribute)”.

Its statocentric and rationalist approach, dominated by the idea of security as the main aim -defined in terms of power and material capacities-, has made the attempt to explain regionalism conditional. Thereby, regional integration is understood as a means to satisfy particular national interests in the international field. The statesmen’s rationality facilitates to achieve certain agreements and/or cooperative systems in order to favour their national interests, but reminding the distrust that relative profits cause. Thus, the interests externally given and reinforced by material capacities make the sense of belonging in the community or other ideational factors that we mentioned before futile. Once we have posed the neorealist departing point, we can state that, according to this theory, regional integration could be explained as some kind of specific alliance among sovereign and independent states, notably related to security affairs that do not imply any renunciation in decisional power. As Hurrell declares, “[f]or the neo-realist, the politics of regionalism and the emergence of regionalist alignments have much in common with the politics of alliance formation”. Following this line, we could point out international organizations that neorealism could interpret as cases of regionalism like NATO; however, we will not include such security international organization in our study because they are outside the scope of this paper.

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22 Cooperación Interregional e Interregionalismo: Una Aproximación Socialconstructivista, Julia Schünemann, WP 05/06, ICEI, my translation from Spanish.

23 Ben Rosamond, Theories of European Integration, 2000, p. 132.

Another approximation from the neorealism to regionalism and international regimes is the **hegemonic stability theory**, which links the realist idea of power and security with the cooperative elements – typical of international regimes– motivated by the hegemon. At first sight, this theory could resemble the *amalgamated communities* of Deutsch in the sense of adhesion around a hegemon, but it is completely different in its justifications. In fact, the hegemonic stability theory denies the possibility of either creating or maintaining a cooperative regime without the existence of a hegemonic leader that provides fortress and efficacy. This theory has suggested two different theoretical developments depending on a benevolent hegemon or a coercitive one, as Snidal noticed, but in any case, “[a]t the theoretical level, two main criticisms have been directed towards the theory of hegemonic stability. The first questions the interpretation of international regimes as public goods. The second takes issue with hegemony theorists' one-sided reading of the (rationalist) collective action literature, which ignores the (however limited) opportunities for cooperation in the provision of public goods to which Olson and his successors have pointed”.

Aside from this criticism, the notion of “driving force” is very useful, if not hegemon, that exists in all the regional integration process, acting in a more evident way –coercion, as the United States in the NAFTA- or in a more subtle way –soft power, as Brazil in Mercosur. In fact, with reference to our case study, Mercosur, even if Brazil, as a global player, behaves in a diplomatic and soft power way in the regional field, it seems unrealistic to perceive Brazil as a hegemon which can guarantee the Southern Cone stability. This occurs because Brazil is not willing to assume the cost of regional leadership because a hegemonic attitude would provoke a hostile reaction from its regional neighbours.

In relation to regional integration, the realist emphasis on power also concerns the economic strength in terms of competitiveness in international trade and investment flows, so “Neo-realism focuses attention on power not as a means to an end but as the end itself”.

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25 “The theory of hegemonic stability, which links strong international regimes to the existence of a dominant state in the respective issue-area, seeks to explain when and why international regimes emerge and are *effective* in the sense that states follow cooperative policies which, in the absence of regime, they would most likely not pursue”, Andreas Hasenclever, Peter Mayer and Volker Rittberger, *Theories of International Regimes*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 86.

26 *Ibidem*, p. 95
both on power-political pressures and on the dynamics of mercantilist economic competition. Since the main aim for constituting a region would be a stronger geostrategic position in both military and economic fields, the role of international trade will be also a priority. In the crossroad among neorealism, liberalism and regional integration theory, we can situate what has been called liberal intergovernmentalism. Its principal author, Moravcsik, joins together his regionalism studies with his realist and liberal postulates, and settles that regional integration has three bases: First, the assumption that states act rationally, so when a state starts an integration process is aware of doing it to get its goals. Second, national preferences are built and decided in relation to domestic politics and it is indirectly conditioned by economic interdependence. And finally, third, governments are the principal actors scorning other possible actors and remarking that governmental decisions depend mainly on the material capacities of each state. From here on, Moravcsik reformulates the neorealist characteristics trying to explain the integration phenomenon from the role of the state and national interest point of view and rejecting any possibility of supranationality or even cooperation politics if they are not subordinated to intergovernmental necessities.

In order to close the neorealism bloc, the Latin American academy brings us a theoretical approach, the peripheral realism that reminds us how Mercosur consolidation has been impregnated with an economic and pragmatic logic. Carlos Escudé has developed this approach bringing the realist postulates to the South American peripheral situation, where national interest and material needs are neither related to increasing world power nor to international balance of power. In fact, he maintains through his

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28 “Neorealists predict that Europe will unify to emulate its continental sized economic rivals to become more competitive and to better project its interests”, Integration under Anarchy: Neorealism and the European Union, Simon Collard-Wexler, en European Journal of International Relations 2006; 12: 424.
30 “As he puts it “intergovernmental demand for policy ideas, not the supranational supply of these ideas, is the fundamental exogenous factor driving integration. To a very large extent, the demand for co-operative policies creates its own supply” (Moravcsik, 1995) quoted at The Government and Politics of the European Union, Neill Nugent, Ed. Palgrave, 1999 [1989], p.511.
peripheral realism that international relations should be conditioned by the material needs of its people, defined as national interest, and therefore they should forget other ethical considerations. In conclusion, on the one hand we can see some kind of neorealism focused on security and state survival and, on the other hand, talking about a peripheral state as Argentina, Escudé embraces a strategic attitude of bandwagoning and a regional alliance that implies an important saving of risks and costs in the international scene, and without giving up neither sovereignty nor independence. “Thus the foreign policy adopted focuses on preserving the status quo to the detriment of all other more ambitious options, in a combination of behaviours that leads to a defensive, marginal, passive role in world affairs.”

III. Critical theories and new explanations

Against the mainstream of the disciplines –neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism–, new critical approaches arose in the 80’s and 90’s. One of these new voices, focused mainly on regionalism, is the new regionalism approach of Hettne, which links globalization and regionalism. At the same time, Hettne provides his theoretical framework with a normative and plurithematic aspect, very far from the economic regional integration theory. On this basis, Hettne points out the difference between both concepts: “According to the regionalist approach, integration should above all serve the purpose of creating viable regions; whereas economic integration theory as such, at least in principle, is neutral with respect to the specific value of the region or whatever the particular unit to be integrated. [...] Regionalization is not only economic, but also political, social and cultural”. Therefore, introducing “the political ambition of creating territorial identity and regional coherence” as a main character of


34 Ib idem, p.286.
regional integration, the new regionalism approach challenges the neoutilitarian theories. In fact, these postulates are very close to constructivist ones (vid. infra), because Hettne and Soderbaum understand that “political communities are not exogenously given, but constructed by historically contingent interactions”.

Hettne’s point of view is very useful in two ways. First of all, since he links new regionalism and globalization, he establishes a comparison between old and new regionalism, enhancing that the main difference is neither temporal nor quantitative, but qualitative. In order to prove this, he contrasts the old regionalism –that appeared in a bipolar world, “from above”, focused on economic protection and specific aims between neighbour countries- with the new regionalism. The latter is characterized by its emergence in a multipolar world and its interconnection with globalization, where the emergent regions seek to cooperate in order to integrate themselves in world economy. At the same time, new regionalism becomes a multidimensional process with multiple aims and it is framed in a structural global transformation where several non state actors operate at different levels of the global system.

According to one of Hettne’s last articles, “since the new regionalism now has two decades behind it, this may be the time to bury the distinction and recognise the study of regionalism as a search for a moving target, even if this leaves us with a complicated ontological problem”. At the end of the day,

35 “[A]n attempt to transcend state-centrism and focus more on social interactions becomes the first shortcoming of this NRT [New Regionalism Theory]”, Zoleka V. Ndayi, Review Article “Theorising the Rise of Regionness” by Bjorn Hettne and Fredrik Soderbaum, in Politikon, April 2006, 33 (1), p. 117.


39 Ib idem, p. 20.
he tries to blur the difference between old and new regionalism in order to create a more comprehensive and dynamic approach. In the same way, Hettne and Soderbaum defend the suitability of a bridge between “European Union integration studies” and “International Relations regionalism studies”.

Secondly, Hettne searches to create a way to measure regionness. He recognizes five levels, not necessarily consecutive but important for knowing the situation in a regional social process building. Thus “the level of regionness defines the position of a particular region or regional system in terms of regional coherence an identity, which can be seen as a long-term endogenous historical process changing over time from coercion, the building of empires and nations, to more voluntary cooperation” 40. On this basis, there are five levels: (i) the regional space, or the geographic area; (ii) the regional complex, which implies an embryonic interdependence; (iii) the regional society, which could cover different aspects such as political, cultural, economic, or military; (iv) the regional community, origin of transnational civil society in the sense that stimulates the convergence of values and, at the same time, equivalent to pluralistic security community of Deutsch; and (v) the regional institutionalized polity, which would have the decision making capacity 41.

Even if Hettne and Soderbaum approach resembles some kind of structuralist enunciations, it is worth investigating further this theory in order to underline the differences. **Structuralism** tries to explain the regional integration from a socio-economic focus, inherited from the historical materialism of Marx. The International Political Economy challenged the Cold War realist explanation and became more powerful with authors such as Wallerstein and centre-periphery theories and dependency theory by Raul Prebisch, president of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

According to our main subject, regionalism, Cox’s approach to historic materialism gives us some keys. As Cox states, neorealism and historical materialism share their interest for conflict, but with a radical distinction: the former explains the conflict as something inherent to the system structure, while the latter explains it as a cause of system structure change. Or in Cox’s words: “Both realism and historical materialism direct attention to conflict. Neorealism sees conflict as inherent in the human condition, a constant factor flowing directly from the power-seeking essence of human nature and taking the political form of a continual reshuffling of power among the players in a zero-sum game, which is always played according to its own innate rules. Historical materialism sees in conflict the process of a continual remaking of human nature and the creation of new patterns of social relations which change the rules of the game and out of which -if historical materialism remains true to its own logic and method- new forms of conflict may be expected ultimately to arise. In other words, neorealism sees conflict as a recurrent consequence of a continuing structure, whereas historical materialism sees conflict as a possible cause of structural change”. Thus, structuralists are against multilateralism and neoliberal institutionalism because it fosters inequalities and unjust structures; but at the same time they understand that the battle to change this unfair system structure can only be fought in a multilateral world.

Structuralism has had an important impact among the South American scholars who have tried to explain the South American regional integration process. Following this line, authors as Helio Jaguaribe and Aldo Ferrer have reinforced the idea of regionalism as a defensive reaction against international marginalization generated by economic globalization. At the same time, they value socio-cultural aspects of interregional identity over economic ones. As Jaguaribe states, the “Mercosur is the main tool for its members to protect their international interests and, in the long term, to preserve their identity and

42 Approaches to World Order, Robert Cox y Timothy Sinclair, 1996, p.95.
43 “Multilateralism is seen, first, as an instrument for institutionalizing the core-periphery structure of domination”, ib idem, p.511.
44 “Secondarily, however, in the world-system perspective, multilateralism is seen as a terrain of struggle between core and periphery, a terrain in which the grievances of the periphery can be aggregated into collective demands upon the core for structural change in the world economy”, ib idem, p.512.
their national autonomy”. On this basis, we can appreciate how the regional integration is defined in two ways: firstly in terms of defence or reaction, notably against globalization and against American ideological point of view; and secondly as a wish to unify the whole Latin America under the same pattern in spite of the existence of different theoretical approaches.

Unlike Jaguaribe, Aldo Ferrer maintains a similar thesis, but his optimism is reflected in the distinction between Mercosur ideal and Mercosur posible. The former would be an exercise of comparison with the European Union to reinforce the Mercosur disappointment for not being able to create supranational institutions. The latter would be a comparison between the South American situation in the 80’s and its situation two decades later which affirms that from the first bilateral agreements between Sarney and Alfonsín the outcomes have been satisfactory and there are promising perspectives. There is no need to say that Ferrer’s choice for the Mercosur posible implies a normative position for the future and, at the same time, implies some criticisms of some past events. In these terms, one of the main South American structuralist criticism concerns the neoliberal economic plans of the 90’s, exemplified by the Washington Consensus. “Mercosur requires, as a necessary condition, the agreement between Argentina and Brazil, whose convergence –while Alfonsin and Sarney were in office- was the key point to the process building [...] This strategy was abandoned since the process was delegated to the market forces, to an accelerated chronogram of automatic custom duty deduction, under the presidencies of Menem and Collor”.

Radically against structuralism, but also focused on the economic aspect of regional integration, there is

45 Mercosul e a Nova Ordem Mundial, Helio Jaguaribe, en Dossiê CEBRI, volume 1, año 1, 2002, p. 6; my translation from portuguese.


47 El éxito del Mercosur posible, Aldo Ferrer, Revista de Economía Política, vol.27, no.1, Jan/Mar. 2007, p. 6-7; my translation from Spanish.
the liberal economic school. We make this digression on our regionalism academic review in order to avoid future misunderstandings. Nowadays it is common to encounter authors who see regional integration just as an economic process and who refer only to political aspects when they talk about cooperation. In this line, we can show how they use the classical position of Bela Balassa –quoted by Nye- who “defines economic integration as the abolition of discrimination between economic units belonging to different national states”\textsuperscript{48}. Balassa established a classification to measure the integration level from “no tariff or quotas” (free trade area), “common external tariff” (customs union), “free flow of factors” (common market), “harmonization of economic policies” (economic union), to “unification of policies and political institutions” (total economic integration). Thereby, the purely political aspect only appears at the last stage and conditioned by the economic success. These typical economic arguments, supported by numerous economists, ignore the importance of domestic political factors –such as elite decisions and social support to integration- and international ones –for example, regional political or geostrategic contexts-.

As it seems evident, economic science has a limited vision in explaining regional integration. If we argue that there is nothing political in economic decision –which is almost impossible-, the Economy could explain only the aspects concerning economic exchanges and this is not enough to understand regional integration.

Finally, constructivism is consolidated as the most powerful approach to challenge the academic rationalist mainstream. The principal constructivist contribution is its ideational ontology, inherited by sociologists as Durkheim and Weber. According to this ontology, construction of social interest and ideational factors such as ideas, norms, and values become very relevant at the expense of material capacities and externally given interests, which are characteristics of rationalist and neoutilitarist approaches.

From the beginning, we must note that constructivism can also be understood as a metatheoretic approach with three main elements⁴⁹. First of all, epistemologically, knowledge is socially constructed; secondly, ontologically, the world is socially constructed; and thirdly, the liaison process between the other two elements is a reflexive process, i.e. a process that makes us wonder how knowledge of social construction could affect the reality of social construction and vice versa.

The constructivist approach has the privilege to be the main driving force behind the study of security communities. As Acharya proclaims, the “mainstream international relations theory would only return to the concept in the wake of the constructivist revolt against neo-realism and neo-liberalism. Subsequently, constructivism has been the main theoretical framework for the study of security communities”⁵⁰. According to constructivism, the absence of war and the reliable atmosphere inside the security communities are not just due to power distribution in international relations or international economic contexts, but also –and mainly– due to interconnections between the national communities, including identity building, socialization and so on. “The habit of war avoidance found in security communities results from interactions, socialisation, norm setting and identity building, rather than from forces outside of these processes (such as the international distribution of power)”⁵¹.

The relation between norms and constructivism is very interesting in the sense that norms are not just a way to regulate state behaviour, but a way to redefine national interests and to develop collective identities⁵². In fact, the symptomatic element of this change from “regulate” to “redefine” is the creation

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⁴⁹ A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations, Stefano Guzzini, in European Journal of International Relations, 2000.

⁵⁰ Amitav Acharya, Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia. ASEAN and the problem of regional order, Routledge, 2001, p.3.

⁵¹ Ib idem, p.3.

⁵² “Norms not only “regulate” state behavior as in neo-liberal institutionalism, but also redefine state interests and constitute
of new habits, which implies more than just the legal obligation idea of fulfilment to avoid some kind of coercitive power. Following this argument, constructivism retakes Deutsch’s contributions to allege that security communities need certain degree of loyalty or shared identity. This notion of shared identity implies both the emergence of a “we-feeling” and the processes that foster this sentiment of community belonging. Once this sensation arises, the security community becomes a social habit and the renunciation of use of force ceases to be understood as a legal obligation with a punishment associated in case of non-fulfilment. To sum up, we witness a social identity building and subsequently, a security community emergence, that aspire to solve the internal problems by non violent methods.

In relation with normative aspects of constructivism, it is interesting to point out the promotion of a cognitive regionalism. “Constructivist theories focus on regional awareness and regional identity, on the shared sense of belonging to a particular regional community, and on what has been called “cognitive regionalism”. They stress the extent to which regional cohesion depends on a sustained and durable sense of community based on mutual responsiveness, trust, and high levels of what might be called “cognitive interdependence”. At the same time, “[t]he construction of identity is central to the kind of “we-feeling” that Deutsch identified as a key feature of security communities. The notion of identity runs deep into the heart of constructivist approaches because of its central claim that the development of a collective identity can ameliorate the security dilemma among states”. The same idea has been developed in terms of epistemic communities trying to exemplify the dynamism of this process and, at the same time, the importance of this channels that give ideas the possibility to move and to reach different communities. “They argue that epistemic communities are crucial "channels through which

state identities, including the development of collective identities”, ib idem, p.4.

53 “Deutsch stressed that security communities require the emergence of “some degree of generalized common identity or loyalty”, including “the deliberate promotion of processes and sentiments of mutual identification, loyalties, and “we-feelings”. In security communities, war avoidance becomes a social habit, rather than a mere legal obligation backed by sanctions”, ib idem, p.25.

54 Andrew Hurrell, in Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective, in Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell, Regionalism in World Politics. Regional Organization and International Order, 1995, p.64.

55 Amitav Acharya, Constructing a security community in Southeast Asia. ASEAN and the problem of regional order, 2001, p.27.
new ideas circulate from societies to governments as well as from country to country" (P. Haas 1992b:27). Epistemic communities are defined as "network[s] of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area"(P. Haas 1992b: 3). Notwithstanding the different constructivist approaches, we have to recognize Alexander Wendt as one of its main authors. He maintains a statocentric perspective based in the idea of states as the most important actors – but not the only ones - in international relations. From the beginning he affirms that “[i]n contrast to the "economic" theorizing that dominates mainstream systemic international relations scholarship, this involves a "sociological social psychological" form of systemic theory in which identities and interests are the dependent variable”. In this way, he reinforces his interest for the identity concept in expense of economic reductionism used by the rationalist mainstream of the International Relations discipline.

Thus, Wendt defines constructivism as “a structural theory of the international system that makes the following core claims: (1) states are the principal units of analysis for international political theory; (2) the key structures in the states system are intersubjective, rather than material; and (3) state identities and interests are an important part constructed by these social structures, rather than given exogenously to the system by human nature or domestic politics”. According to Wendt, the International Relations challenge is to demonstrate that realism and rationalism are wrong. Firstly, to refute realism, he gives


priority to intersubjective elements over material ones, to social interactions over material capacities in
terms of military power. Secondly, he accuses rationalism of not being able to explain the structural
transformation in international system due to its assumptions of identities and interests externally given
and fixed.60

The link between Wendt’s constructivism and regional integration theory becomes real in his
understanding of regionalism as a paradigmatic case of structural change in international relations not
capable of being explained by material aspects, but by ideational ones. Indeed, he affirms that
“[i]ntegration theorists appreciated this suggestion long ago, but their nascent sociology of international
community has been lost in the economics of international cooperation developed by realists and
rationalists”61. For this reason it is important to emphasise that constructivist approach to regional
integration is more comprehensive than rationalist ones.

In our particular case of Mercosur, we can find some case studies related to South American
regionalism. According to Deutsch’s security communities’ theory and introducing a constructivist
nuance, Andrew Hurrell and Louise Fawcett have tried to prove that traditional explanations are not
useful anymore62. On this basis, “[c]onstructivism, then, helps us understand both the ways in which
more expansive notions of community may emerge, but also the ways in which historically embedded
identities constitute important obstacles to cooperation”63. In their historical review of South American
over the last decades, they have focused on interests and changes in identity in order to look for new

60 “The essence of rationalism, in contrast, is that the identities and interests that constitute games are exogenous and
constant. Rationalism has many uses and virtues, but its conceptual tool kit is not designed to explain identities and
interests, the reproduction and/or transformation of which is a key determinant of structural change”, ibidem, p.394.
61 Ib idem, p.394.
62 “[T]he idea of a “satisfied Brazil” or a “revisionist Argentina” begs many questions about the character and historical
construction of states that simply cannot be answered within the intellectually impoverished world of neorealism”,
Andrew Hurrell, An emerging security community in South America, in Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, in Security
Communities, 1998, p.239.
63 ib idem, p.257.
ways to approach regionalism, notably connected to a complex process of socialization. In any case, they propose constructivism as a complementary prism to explain the Mercosur case, but without denying the importance of neorealism in the issues concerning power, pressures and hegemony. Finally, after considering different regionalist approaches, Hurrell and Fawcett conclude that “if still imperfect, security community can be identified within Mercosur, built around the changes that have taken place in the core relationship between Brazil and Argentina.” The socio-cultural interaction between these countries could be exemplified by several events as the emergence of a South American news channel –TeleSur-, the strengthen of academic ties and students visitors programmes between South American universities or, among other, the creation of funds of structural convergence (FOCEM) for the poorest regions of Mercosur in order to stimulate solidarity and common identity building.

Amidst the few South American constructivist approaches, it is worth highlighting the one by Myriam Colacrai, for whom “the ideational strengthen of Mercosur is a necessary task for its emergence and consolidation [...] The institutions can help to foster the regional integration itself, limiting the possibilities that from other contexts take advantage from the current vulnerabilities of this process. If we recognize the constitutive value rather than the regulatory value of institutions, we would be in the path to concrete the virtuous cycle that we have defined as: ideas + institutions + deciding statesmen = politics, the whole in a continuous process of feedback.”

64 “Interests and identities are being reshaped through this period as interaction with the global political and economic system creates a complex process of socialization”, ibidem, p.249.

65 “Within its own limits, neo-realist theory still has a good deal to tell us both about the importance of “outside-in” pressures and about the importance of hegemony”, Andrew Hurrell, in Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective, inn Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell, Regionalism in World Politics. Regional Organization and International Order, 1995, p.53.


IV. Conclusions and future perspectives

This paper has attempted to provide some tentative conclusions to the study of regional integration to date. First of all, it seems that the growing interest that has been dedicated to regional integration has not been enough to build a theoretical corpus to fully understand this issue. This short academic review has tried to demonstrate that none of these theories can explain regionalism by themselves and thus, we need to use a multidisciplinary approach, which includes a sociocultural nuance in order to avoid the rationalist and neoutilitarian simplifications.

Secondly, concerning our particular case of Mercosur, it is important to point out once more the importance of regional integration as a key factor to stabilize and to foster democracy in this region in the last two decades. We can, indeed, welcome this kind of pacific change in international relations in this area which affects all levels of life in member state societies.

Finally, the last conclusion –which will be our driving force for further research- concerns the hypothesis of the suitability of constructivist approach as a “must” for explaining regional integration. According to the “we-feeling” idea inside the security communities and the interaction process among the people (agency) through the regional integration frame (structure), we will suggest that only an approach comprising ideational factors could be a satisfactory explanation of regionalism. Where we see a trend towards a dynamic process characterized by a sociocultural feedback, the mainstream of the discipline –based on rational choice perspectives- see a static picture connected to material capacities. Thus, the Mercosur process from a constructivist approach seems to be an unexplored field to be studied in future projects. For this task, it will be relevant not just to develop constructivist potentialities but also its vulnerabilities and criticisms. In this line, we could anticipate three main criticisms to deal with: (i) the apparent lack of explanation of a key concept in International Relations, i.e. power; (ii) the lack of explanation in relation to the first impulse which unleashes the regional integration process; and (iii) the methodological criticism for not being a holistic theory, but an approach.
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