Dialogues, understandings and misunderstandings: social movements in MERCOSUR

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The current process of globalization is effecting substantial changes in the economic, social and political organization of the world today. International capital flows, the opening up and deregulation of national economies, the end of the Cold War, and technological expansion and revolution in the fields of information and communication, are bringing about social and cultural transformations of enormous significance.

In one sense, these are not totally new phenomena, but represent rather changes in their scale and rate of occurrence. The history of colonization and European domination, like the economic history of empires, were worldwide phenomena which occurred when there were no satellites providing instant communication and facilitating the coordinated operation of capital markets, as is the case nowadays.

The history of modern social movements also reveals the presence of an international dimension since the very beginning. Thus, the workers’ movement that emerged at the very beginning of the industrial revolution had an international character. This was already apparent in the exhortation ‘workers of the world, unite’, which 150 years ago expressed a global view of the development of the working class. In the twentieth century, also, this worldwide and global dimension has been in evidence in the objectives, strategies and leaders of other movements: the suffragette movement of the 1920s and, more recently, feminism, the environmental movement, the indigenous peoples’ movement, and the contemporary human rights movements. In fact, all these movements developed simultaneously at the local level and within a global context.

However, the awareness of local, national and global levels has not been constant throughout history, and nowadays new kinds of awareness exist on account of the scale and scope of the contemporary phenomena associated with globalization. There are two contradictory trends existing side by side at the end of this century: one towards globalization and transnationalization, involving phenomena covering the whole planet, such as communications, economic interests, environmental threats, the arms race and international agreements and institutions; and the other marked by the revitalization of local interests and the reaffirmation of ancestral ties. This latter finds expression in a more specific and violent form in ethnic and cultural rivalries and in many peoples’ feelings of cultural and symbolic self-centredness, but cannot take a technological or material form because of the risk of becoming isolated.

It is against this background that the various projects and processes of ‘regional integration’ taking place in various parts of the
world need to be seen. The European Union is undoubtedly the world leader in such processes, both on account of the degree of integration achieved and because of its role as an international model. There have been similar initiatives in the past in other regions, with varying degrees of success, such as the Andean Pact, the Central American Common Market, ALALC and LAIA in Latin America, and several that are currently under way (NAFTA in North America, APEC in Asia and MERCOSUR in South America). It seems highly probable that, in the forthcoming decade, other projects of this kind will be carried out in other parts of the world (central and eastern Europe, parts of Asia, southern Africa). Such initiatives are generally seen as ways of responding to the challenges posed by increasing globalization and transnationalization (in technology, communications, economic interests, and so on), and to the difficulties encountered by inward-looking national economies.

These regional integration projects are essentially economic processes. They originate in the wishes of the élite and the political decisions of governments and powerful economic interests. Most of the formal discussions focus on the macroeconomic aspects and on sectoral agreements: trade, integration of the productive sectors, finance, and so on. However, underlying the explicit subjects of negotiation there is another level of meaning linked to the cultural and subjective dimensions of such integration projects, the actions of other social agents (which may be excluded from the formal negotiations), and other arenas of social action and dialogue outside the formal negotiating structures.

Accordingly, the main aim of this study is to analyse the societal and cultural changes that occur in the context of regional ‘integration’ projects and processes. The integration achieved through MERCOSUR provides a particularly good opportunity to observe and explore the ways in which the process affects the development of social movements. The intention is not to present research findings, since the whole process is in its infancy and as yet little studied, but rather to ask new questions and pursue new lines of inquiry which will be central to the task of study and research. Although the focus is on one particular case, many of the questions, as well as the theoretical approach, may well be of broader relevance and applicable to other regions and other projects now taking place.

**What is MERCOSUR?**

MERCOSUR (the Southern Common Market) is an initiative for regional integration, whose full members – Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay – are associated with Chile and Bolivia through free trade agreements. The four member countries signed an agreement in March 1991, although Brazil and Argentina had already entered into a bilateral cooperation and integration programme in 1985. The free trade agreements with Chile and Bolivia were signed in 1995 and 1996. The 1991 agreement provides for the establishment of a common market through the gradual harmonization of external tariffs towards a common regime and gradual trade liberalization within the region.

On the basis of the 1991 Treaty of Asuncion, several intergovernmental decision-making bodies have been set up (the Council of the Common Market, the Common Market Group and its Working Subgroups, the MERCOSUR Trade Commission). Parliamentary coordinating bodies (the joint parliamentary commission, a body representing the Parliaments of the countries) and an Economic–Social Consultative Forum (whose members are drawn from the economic and social sectors of the member countries) have also been set up.

The core of the ‘integration’ process lies in the economic and commercial negotiations between sectors of the different countries (it is in the automobile sector that most efforts at sectoral negotiations appear to be taking place), but this process of ‘integration’ has also generated an enormous number of meetings of different kinds. There are political meetings, including periodic encounters between the Presidents of the member countries, with widespread press coverage where speeches calling for integration, based on the ‘brotherhood’ and common destiny of the peoples, are repeated again and again. There are also intergovernmental meetings and groups to negotiate and reach agreement on such subjects as the recognition of educational qualifications, compacts on social security and employment policies, cultural policy projects and programmes, and so on.

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All these formal negotiations, speeches and agreements on the part of national governments are ‘top down’ activities, involving very little knowledge of, and almost no participation by, sections of society other than the economic or political sectors directly concerned in each particular case. However, the enormous amount of activity involved in the formal negotiations for integration has imparted a new dynamism to social actors traditionally outside of or excluded from such negotiations. In fact, the whole agenda of cultural and social contacts and exchanges in the region is now undergoing review, and activities carried out by social movements at the ‘regional’ level are becoming the subject of planning, monitoring, study and strategic analysis by those involved. Although, as various writers have pointed out, there has been a ‘democratic deficit’ in the formal negotiations on integration, the societies and social actors involved have their own ways of approaching the process, and engage in common activities and strategies, as they have always done.

It is worth pointing out here that while the path towards regional integration in MERCOSUR is a recent one, at least as regards governmental agreements, the links between the societies and states in question have deep historical roots. The frontiers between the countries were established – not without conflict – during the colonial period, during the wars of independence of the first half of the nineteenth century, and in armed conflicts and subsequent negotiations, with some frontier disputes still remaining unresolved. In social and cultural terms, these frontiers have always been highly porous, constantly crossed by migratory flows (either for economic reasons or by political exiles), by cultural exchanges of various kinds and by tourism. These exchanges have produced networks of family relationships and friendships, as well as transnational relationships of employment that are of the greatest importance for the daily life of large sections of the population. For some mass cultural activities, especially music but also some of the mass media, frontiers hardly seem to exist at all. Their porous nature has also enabled the links to be maintained between military and security organizations, as was clearly shown in the evil and terrifying coordination of state terrorism under the dictatorships of the 1970s.

Observation of the processes now under way in the region shows that the formal aspect of MERCOSUR – the negotiations and agreements – is beginning to operate as a new framework or structure for activities – dialogues, exchanges, contacts and conflicts – between various social actors and forces. Actors and contacts already in place are beginning to take on a new significance within this framework, and there are new opportunities for forms of action, each with their own understandings and misunderstandings.

**Levels of ‘integration’**

As has already been observed, the negotiation of ‘integration’ is a high-level process, in which state officials and business representatives play a leading role. In these negotiations there are two ways of thinking that exist side by side, and which theoretically may appear to be mutually contradictory. On the one hand, there is a rational approach based on interests, a calculation of costs and benefits, according to which the agreements reached result in common advantages. Accordingly, agreements can only be reached in areas or on subjects where the cost–benefit calculation is not defined in ‘zero-sum’ terms, that is, in situations in which the advantage of some does not imply disadvantages for others. Following this approach, there will also be ‘agreements’ when the differences in strength between the two sides are such that the ‘weak’ have no other option than to accept the (sometimes camouflaged) logic imposed by the strong.

On the other hand, in the public discourse of the leading players in the negotiations, there is almost constant reference to a ‘regional’ identity that emphasizes and reaffirms historical unity, the eternal and ‘essential’ brotherhood between the different peoples, integration and the common ‘destiny’ of the member countries, while asserting at the same time that integration does not mean the loss of distinctive national characteristics. References to integration, brotherhood, historical origins and common destiny are all to be found in official declarations and in the assertions made by many researchers and observers of the current process, which combine an idealized view of history with an expression of desires (Grimson, 1997). Thus, well-known authors write that:
MERCOSUR is not a new concept. On the contrary, the idea of integration has been a constant factor in a shared history that even goes back to the period before the discovery by the Spanish and the Portuguese and that has continued to develop over many centuries even after independence from the respective imperial powers. (Peña, 1997, p. 19)

In five centuries of misunderstandings between Argentina and Brazil the common historical roots and cultural affinities were pushed into the background by mutual isolation and real or imaginary conflicts. Nowadays, however, new frontiers are opening up. Knowledge about each other is increasing, the tenuous barrier of language is being dissolved, and the vision of a shared destiny within the wider world appears to be gradually taking shape. (Ferrer, 1997, p. 102)

These separate processes of interaction and negotiation undoubtedly exist in all spheres, with predominance switching from one pole to the other in this dialectic of interests and fraternity. And yet, while it is important to recognize these two processes, in seeking to analyse the situation it is not productive to put forward hypotheses that link the various areas of negotiations (economic, political, cultural) with the predominance of either. Identities, trust and feelings, as well as considerations of power, are present when agreements are being negotiated in the car industry, while interests are present when cultural exchanges are being discussed. Each nation, and the different social groups within them, approach the other nations with a baggage of cultural values, traditions, beliefs, traditional links and images, and this baggage influences the way in which the process of integration develops. There is apprehension on the part of smaller nations towards the larger; fears and rivalries exist in the labour market; there are historically shaped feelings of mutual trust and distrust, forms of discrimination and xenophobia. We know very little about the processes of dialogue and integration between societies and cultures. Thus we need to discover these underlying patterns and examine how they are revealed in the process of dialogue and interaction that is developing within social relations, both in daily life and in the contacts taking place between social groups and within formal negotiations.

Conceptually, this means putting inverted commas around the notion of 'integration'. While there are data to show that markets and economies are being transformed in the direction of greater commercial exchanges and trade, the notion of economic integration means more than the opening-up of markets. It may include exchange rates, macroeconomic policies, investment policies and financial viability, not to mention the more controversial fields of labour markets and salary levels (Ferrer, 1997). Similarly, at the social and cultural levels, 'integration' cannot be regarded as an automatic or self-evident process. In fact, research on specific processes of dialogue and interaction will reveal, on the one hand, the conditions and circumstances in which tensions and conflicts emerge so that national identities are reinforced and rivalries and misunderstandings appear, and, on the other, situations that lead to agreements and expressions of harmony and creative dialogue.

At the same time, the processes of dialogue and integration do not involve processes of cultural homogenization or of political consensus. In fact, one of the great dangers when speaking of interaction or 'integration' is to understand them as being a process of integration between homogeneous nations leading towards global homogenization. The processes of reshaping identities, sociocultural relations and methods of communication arising within MERCOSUR take on specific forms in different places, according to their historical, geographical, economic and cultural backgrounds. There are distinctly different geographical areas, so that the significance of MERCOSUR in the northeast of Brazil or in Argentinian Patagonia is not the same as in the border areas around the Paraná Basin or in Uruguay. As change proceeds, new fringe areas and new inequalities are being created as part of a process that recreates multicultural heterogeneity based on the encounter with the past in a contemporary dialogue. In this context, there are supranational cultural subregions, such as the economic/cultural region of the gauchos, the Chaco region, or the Jesuit-Guarani region (Achugar and Bustamante, 1996), and new subregions that have been created through the process of interaction now under way.

Frameworks of interpretation, opportunities for action

For the social actors and forces that have been operating at local, national or supernational
levels, the formal agreements of MERCOSUR bring the possibility of changing the scene of their operations. New political opportunities and sets of circumstances arise where new frameworks of interpretation for their action can be developed. As the process of regional ‘integration’ advances, however, the change of scope and focus of action ceases to be a strategic option or just one possibility among others. On the contrary, the social actors are compelled to assess their position and their action in the new regional framework. Those who fail to do so will be left behind and will miss the ‘train of history’.

A starting-point for elaborating conceptually on the notions of framework and scope could be the concept of ‘framework’ proposed by Goffman (1974) to denote schemas of interpretation which enable individuals to place, perceive, identify and put a label on events in their daily lives and in the wider world. Frameworks give events and occurrences meaning, they give the world meaning, they organize experience and guide individual and collective action. Frameworks are the metaphors, symbolic representations and cognitive keys that model behaviour and help people to assess events.

It is clear that interpretative frameworks are neither permanent nor stable. Nor are they agreed by consensus or uniform. At any point in history, several interpretative frameworks might be competing with each other, providing support to or even promoting conflicts among actors, challenging hegemonic interpretations and suggesting alternative courses of action. To introduce them into the analysis is to give pride of place to the ideas, cultural traditions, values and beliefs, perceptions and cognitive components of social action. It also means incorporating the ways in which various political actors and activists of social movements generate and develop images, metaphors and changes in the definitions of social situations by capitalizing on the existence of cultural contradictions and new political opportunities. In sum, it is an active process of cultural framing, with effects on the practices of social movements and agents (Zald, 1996).

The elements involved in these frameworks are varied. They may be quite permanent and stable, or more volatile and situational; they may be linked to structures and institutions or more to cultural traditions (Gamson and Meyer, 1996). Social movements (as fields in which actors intervene, rather than actors themselves) could capitalize on or build up their political opportunities precisely on the basis of the ways in which they structure the interpretative frameworks of their action. It is therefore a question of change in the framework or in the parameters of action, a revision of the way in which people perceive and organize the circumstances of their lives, which may involve ‘cognitive liberation’ (McAdam, 1982). In protest movements, for example, it may involve switching from an interpretative framework based on fate or destiny, to one that recognizes injustice and the mutability of social situations. And so, local movements that focus on situational problems (for example, urban demands for drinking water or transport services) may take on new meaning when placed in the context of broader movements and alliances that reinterpret demands in terms of local democracy and self-management, or in terms of the feminist movement’s demands for equity in daily reproductive tasks. In any of these cases, the change of framework means widening the subject of the action, the referent ‘we’, and the movement’s field of action.

In the area under review, that is, action in the public arena, the dominant referent, which constitutes the central interpretative framework for collective actors, has until very recently been the nation-state. The nation-state has been built up during the last two centuries as the ‘natural’ focus of citizens’ loyalty and solidarity, as the ‘natural’ unit of autonomous power and sovereignty. This centrality is now being strongly questioned; the state’s international borders are permeable to the globalization of production, trade, culture and finance, and states are losing control over their destiny as a result. State sovereignty is also compromised by changes in the patterns of regional alliances and federations. At the subnational level, the state is challenged by the revitalization of committed groups defined by various criteria – regional, linguistic, religious, ethnic, gender or lifestyle – and also by innumerable social movements that produce their own basis of solidarity. They are all beginning to compete with the state for the population’s loyalty, and sometimes even for territorial jurisdiction.2

The changes brought about by regional integration projects and changes in scenarios
of action raise specific and practical research questions: what will happen to the various chapters of the women’s movement when the MERCOSUR process begins to develop? And to the workers’ movement, to the ecology movement or the human rights movement? What will happen to ‘regional’ movements (within each country or regions that cut or cross international borders)? How should the opportunities opened up or closed by the new institutional set-up be interpreted? How do the various actors exploit or reject those opportunities? But, most important in this initial stage in which the cultural construction of interpretative frameworks is an unending task, what meaning do actors attach to social processes at the regional level? In short, how do they construct their definition and idea of what is ‘regional’?

We put the emphasis on this initial stage because the establishment of MERCOSUR at a regional level is an ongoing process through which various actors and forces will have to redefine their identities and scenarios in terms of space and territory. Social movements, actors, the meaning of action, participation and commitment, including ‘identity’, are not static phenomena that are fixed and that crystallize once and for all. They are rather processes that are interrupted which develop in possible rather than in fixed directions. The various temporalities – the situational, the short-term and horizons of historical change – unfold, confusingly, quite simultaneously.

There is also the question of ‘space’ or rather the level at which social actors used to and still operate, establishing their limits and identities. In the case in point, in which social movements had organized their action and identity according to relatively narrow interpretative frameworks based on the primary role (or even the natural character) of nations and borders, whereby ‘other neighbours’ were seen as
Social movements in MERCOSUR threats, enemies or simply as empty places, processes of regional dialogue can lead to a broadening and transformation of the framework so that those same ‘neighbours’ begin to be seen as ‘partners’, friends or legitimate intermediaries. From the logic of rapine and rivalry to exchange and dialogue. The former stage seems to be absent from the romantic discourse which denies the existence of ‘others’ and asserts eternal unity or original integration.

The expansion and transformation of interpretative frameworks which have developed during the last few decades owing to trends towards transnationalization and globalization – also owing to supranational regional agreements – are not linear or direct. There are strong tensions rooted in the national arena where the impact of the activities and demands of social movements is felt. After all, nation-states are still the setting in which policy changes can be influenced. In addition, as long as national identity continues to be the focus for the organization of transnational relations and the criterion of representation in international organizations, identification with ‘the nation’ may be strengthened to the detriment of the kinds of identification that cut across nations, and it may even strengthen nationalist ideologies. In the case of the European Union, the development and strength of the regional union has led to a reassertion of the importance of the nation-state, since the very process of integration obliges member states to take a stand on each and every issue raised at the negotiating table (Bull, 1993).

The formal MERCOSUR process is defined as a process of ‘integration’ of countries or nations. It is therefore worth asking what effect this new visibility of the nations in agreements, accords and disagreements has on processes of social dialogue and interaction. Nationalities and nationalism, national institutions and national identification play a leading role. At all kinds of forums for discussion and negotiation, when the context is MERCOSUR, the actors are defined in terms of nationality. Nationality legitimizes attendance and becomes visible and prominent. Thus, it is a well-known fact that when a trade union or academic meeting is held in the MERCOSUR framework, the participants’ nationality becomes an item of information and a concern: are all the countries well represented? How can the balance be maintained? Formerly, or outside of the MERCOSUR context, these questions were not raised so frequently.

If this is so, a complex hypothesis must be revised and it will have to be investigated in various contexts: the ‘MERCOSUR effect’ is paradoxical. At one level, reflection on regional ‘integration’ implies, if not the dissolution of borders, then recognition of a level of unity in diversity. At another level, nationality and national identity not only exist but reinforce each other in regional dialogue and negotiations. While attempting to produce a new collective regional identity, ‘partial’, national identities are being reasserted which highlight distinctions between me/us and ‘others’ – in this case, nationals of other countries. It should therefore be asked what shape this outcrop of nationality takes in the configuration of collective actors. As the process of dialogue and integration develops over time, questions must be asked about transformations in the national identity of collective actors.

Social movements and the scale of their action

Let us begin with history, in which the nation-state constituted the interpretative and organizational framework of collective action. Until the 1970s, in Latin America, discussion of democracy and participation focused on the political system: political parties and elections to bring about social democratic change, or wars of liberation in revolutionary situations. The nation-state was in the centre, and the various social actors shaped their strategies at that level. Even traditional corporate actors – the middle class, the workers’ movement, and the military – were basically seen in terms of their capacity to intervene in the political context of state power. Although there were different forms of transnationalism, the international alliances and reinforcement of these and other actors were geared towards increasing resources and capacity for action and pressure at the national level. Other social actors were weak; there were protests, demands on the state, and social or local cultural organizations.

At the international level, the centrality of the state apparatus led to agreements and con-
ventions prepared and ratified by governments. Society had little direct influence and little leeway in that world. But behind that reality lay another: occulted, barely visible and confused. In 1975, the world was surprised and astonished at women’s militancy in the forums and fringe lectures at the International Conference in Mexico City. The action was not in the Conference but outside, in the myriad proposals and events with which the international women’s movement confronted the official conference. Since then, such parallel activity has become increasingly widespread. The relatively unstructured movements of that time have turned into networks of increasingly powerful non-governmental organizations. At the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio in 1992, at the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, and at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) no longer struggled to have a say but ensured that the voices and initiatives of the parallel forums were represented in official reports. This visibility and international recognition of the NGOs is indicative of enormous organizational and institutional changes.

Forms of interest articulation and groups making demands on the state without channelling them through political parties appeared on the public scene from the 1970s, and they are increasingly important in all countries. In countries that had dictatorial political systems at the time, political parties had very little scope for action and elections were not allowed. These movements could therefore appear to be expressions of political opposition, advocating democracy. That was not always necessarily so. They were often forms of collective action with specific objectives and claims, limited to circumscribed demands. That was the case with many urban movements. With the transition to democracy in the 1980s and democratic institutionalization at the local level, many urban movements became institutionalized social actors, recognized by local governments. There are municipalities that provide a framework for citizens to express demands and exert control over management, and for joint management by local government and community organizations (cf. Raczinski and Serrano, 1992; Baierle, 1998).

Other social movements made choices that took them in other directions during the 1980s and 1990s. Several demands made by the women’s movement and human rights movements were included in the political and social agenda of the transition. The feminist critique of society has thus made inroads into corporate organizations, trade unions, business organizations, the state and the Church. The debate about discrimination against women, the logic of equality and changes in the legal structure, including social and political recognition of certain violations of women’s rights such as domestic violence (but not yet rape within marriage), has now become widespread. Debate on reproductive rights (except for abortion) may also be said to be well under way in most parts of the world.

Also, to the extent that the discourse on human rights has been taken up by broad sectors of society and has not been restricted or reduced to groups of campaigners and activists, it is the actual definition of a social movement’s success or failure that is now being called into question. While the organization of the human rights movement may weaken during a transitional period (for the human rights movement in Argentina, see Jelin, 1995), with conflicts about strategy arising between those who wish to be included in power structures and those who choose not to negotiate, at the same time the movement’s issues and concerns gain currency in wider areas of society. The defence of human rights or, on another related plane, recognition of gender subordination and the urgent need to redress this situation, is being incorporated into the broader democratic frame of analysis, which is an indication of its success; topics are taken up by society, although specific organizations are often weakened and in crisis.

In a medium-term perspective, demands of society that are represented in collective movements have had a changing profile. At their apogee, the workers’ movement and the peasants’ movement had projects for ‘total’ social transformation (Calderón and Jelin, 1987). The time is long past when European activists and trade union organizers went to the Americas with the intention of inculcating ‘working-class consciousness’, their strategy being to sign up at the new local factories as workers and
advance their cause through face-to-face contacts. The next stage was one of ‘national’ struggles. From the 1970s, with the demise of the substitution model of industrialization and the expansion of authoritarian regimes, the arena of operation of social movements and researchers’ view of them changed. The diversity and number of the actors and the diverse and varied import of their action became more visible, claims became more specific, the ‘identikit’ face of emergent actors became clearer (Evers, 1984), and everyday culture began to be the focus of attention. The attractive feature of these forms of expression was that the basic principles of social organization were often questioned on the basis of specific and practical aspects of daily life (Calderón, 1986; Escobar and Álvarez, 1992). These were heterogeneous and diverse movements, in which the assertion of collective identity at the symbolic level was combined in various ways with specific interests and demands.

More recent transformations and current processes – marked by trends towards globalization and the lowering of economic barriers, the political vicissitudes of fragile democracies, social violence and exclusion – point to further changes, to even more varied forms, to multiple meanings, and to actors who organize their strategies at different levels and on different scales simultaneously, ranging from local to regional or world level. More than at any previous moment in history, the multiplicity of meanings implied in the dovetailing, linkage and superposition of different levels is implicit in the expression of collective social demands in a local forum (be they labour claims through a trade union, demands for services from the state, anti-pollution protests or any other type of claim). Similarly, large-scale action taken at the international level – demands in the context of international conferences, for example – are only meaningful when they link (nearly always in a contradictory and conflicting manner) local situations to global issues. The personal, intimate and painful account of rape in the middle of the war in Bosnia, delivered before a large audience with simultaneous translation, and broadcast by television to the whole world (as at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993), placed this multiplicity of meanings and levels at the centre of the world stage.

The process of globalization, through its effects on the content of demands and the rate of flow of communications, is producing major changes in the configuration of social movements. The expansion of international intergovernmental organizations (including the succession of world ‘summits’ during the last few decades on women, population, human rights and the environment) and the development of NGOs have transformed the scene. Direct collective participation is only one of the factors (and is not even indispensable in all cases) in the gestation of social movements and new collective actors. Somewhat independently of the degree and type of grass-roots participation and the level of support shown in a society or by sectors of that society for the issues in question, international networks are being established on problems and issues – advocacy networks, to quote Keck and Sikkink (1998) – which consist of a great variety of intergovernmental organizations, NGOs of an international, national and local character, government offices, foundations, churches, activists and intellectuals.

In that regard it is important to consider the transformation of the interpretative frameworks of social movements to which the emergence of MERCOSUR may give rise. The impact and consequences of decisions taken at the formal level of negotiations on ‘regional integration’ can be felt within the whole of society. Social groups can adjust and adapt to new circumstances and conditions, but do not necessarily or inexorably become social actors who are explicitly included in the process. However, although they do not feature from the outset in news bulletins and on the front pages of daily newspapers, various scenarios and many protagonists are involved in these processes. Many social actors and forces take the region into account in their strategies of action: scientific and university communities, social movements (feminists, environmentalists, indigenous peoples, human rights groups), various kinds of NGOs (from those that promote active citizenship to federations of grass-roots organizations or those that promote micro-enterprises), and artistic communities. Journalists and the mass media tend, albeit with difficulty, to include the regional level in their agenda, producing information about events and proposing various interpretations of the process itself (Grimson, 1998). The programming of tele-
vision fiction, which includes films and serials, can become a crucial force in the formation of images and ideas about ‘ourselves’ and ‘others’. The actions of one group have an influence on the prospective actions of others, mutually reinforcing the inclusion of the regional level. The change in the framework of action mentioned earlier thus comes about gradually.

Inasmuch as the formal negotiation of MERCOSUR is being conducted in the same manner and with a similar institutional approach to that which governs national politics and economies, there is reason to fear that the issues on the agendas of social movements will be excluded and that social actors as protagonists will be left out and ‘will arrive late’ at the negotiating table. ‘To arrive late’ in this instance means that negotiation rules and representation criteria – that is, the institutionality of the process – are already defined in ‘traditional’ ways which exclude and marginalize. Only the demands and protests of social movements will make it possible to change the scenario and the rules of the game. Consequently, the sooner they arrive the easier it will be to participate in the actual process of formulating standards: hence the urgent need to observe and analyse the process of shaping the dialogues and setting the institutional standards of MERCOSUR with a critical eye, on the alert for exclusions and omissions.

This brings us back, therefore, to the initial diagnosis of a ‘democratic deficit’ in the negotiation processes connected with regional integration when they are conducted on the basis of an intergovernmental framework. The establishment of machinery for participation, representation and mediation between societies and groups and regional institutionality becomes a central challenge for the process.4

**Challenges and dilemmas: ourselves and others**

The history of humanity is the history of social and political relations between societies and cultures. There are wars and struggles to dominate others; there are times of mutual understanding, creativity and enrichment through cultural contact. In fact, it can be seen as the history of responses to the question of how social groups behave (and should behave) towards others who do not belong to the same community. This question may be asked at the interpersonal level or at the level of international or intercultural contacts.

All cases involve an ‘I’ and an ‘other’, a ‘we’ and a ‘they’, a classification of the world into two categories of persons. This basic distinction permeates ‘normal’ life. However, there is nothing in the biological nature of humanity that places persons or groups into such differentiated categories. Peoples and cultures define and construct their idea of ‘we’ and ‘others’ as part of their historical development. It is well known that it is logically impossible to establish a principle of identity without, at the same time, establishing a principle of difference. But those who are on one side of the line and their attitude towards the others varies and depends on historical circumstances and contingencies.

In the contemporary international scenario, it is a matter of urgency to understand relations with ‘others’. Current processes of globalization are generating opportunities for cultural contact and creativity. At the same time, new forms of intolerance are being created. Racism and xenophobia, ethnic wars, prejudice and stigma, segregation and discrimination based on nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, age, class and physical condition are very common phenomena, and sometimes lead to very high levels of violence. They all constitute cases of failure to recognize others as full human beings, with the same rights as oneself. They are cases in which difference engenders intolerance, hatred and the urge to annihilate the other. However, these same differences, placed in a context of tolerance and open-mindedness, responsibility and care for others, provide an opportunity to explore new horizons and enrich one’s experience of life.

These general questions have been and continue to be the focus of debate and of actual social struggles for the expansion of citizenship within nation-states, for recognition of the collective rights of minorities, the rights of migrants and multiculturalism. Regional negotiation processes and attempts to formulate supranational agreements give rise to new controversies and tensions in these areas, sometimes reasserting nationalism and deepening divisions. Recognition that national communities and
identities are historical, contingent and ‘imaginary’ constructs does not erase the fact that, throughout history, states and institutional structures have developed and set themselves up as authorities to exercise power and legitimate violence, with real impact on the daily lives of their inhabitants. The development of the nation-state also entailed the institutionalization of boundaries and borders with other states, which gave meaning to national identity vis-à-vis other nations, in a process that always involves frontiers, be they political or symbolic.

The processes of regional integration express the need to rethink the relationship between citizenship and nationality/nationalism. The creation of supranational public forums requires the development of new forms of citizenship. From the viewpoint of subordinated groups, this implies the development of new voices, actors and social movements. Opportunities are provided to express a high degree of cultural creativity based on old or new ethnic identities, on new collective identities or on new commitments to alternative values (Jelin and Hershberg, 1996). These opportunities are enhanced or blocked depending on the way in which new interpretative frameworks of collective action develop. In the new contexts created by the regional integration projects, social movements have the opportunity to strengthen or expand their dual role as collective systems for social recognition that express collective identities, and as non-party-political intermediaries that bring the needs and demands of unarticulated voices into the public arena and link them to the institutional machinery. Their expressive role in building collective identities and social recognition and their instrumental role in challenging existing institutional arrangements are without doubt vital to the democratization of the new regional scenarios.

**Translated from Spanish**

### Notes

1. The negotiation process is developing at great speed and the commercial results are noteworthy: intraregional trade increased at more than 20 per cent per annum between 1985 (when the bilateral agreement between Argentina and Brazil was signed) and 1996 (an increase five times higher than the increase in extraregional trade). Investment programmes, joint ventures and administrative negotiations between governments to achieve convergent standards and practices are gaining ground in spite of the economic and political vicissitudes that mark relations between countries (Ferrer, 1997).

2. The growth of the global economy and related processes does not, however, imply the demise of the state. To quote Calhoun, ‘States remain the organizations of power through which democratic movements have the greatest capacity to affect economic organization … States must remain the highest level of institutional structure at which programmes of democratization themselves can consistently be advanced. And states remain the most crucial objects and vehicles of efforts to achieve “self-determination” or autonomy as a political community’ (Calhoun, 1993, p. 390).

3. In the case of Europe, the development of the European Union, together with the trend towards governmental decentralization, has led to the great vitality of subnational and transnational ‘regions’, which feature prominently in issues relating to the ‘third level’ in Europe (Jeffery, 1997). Incipient signs of similar developments can be detected in MERCOSUR.

4. The democratic deficit cannot be resolved simply by establishing a regional parliament with direct elections, as the European case demonstrates. There is a need for mechanisms to ensure the control and monitoring of regional institutions by civil society and also for alternative participatory arrangements (Bull, 1993).
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