Different tales, different regionalisms

An experienced academic asked a young academic to write an article on alternative forms of regional integration emerging in Latin America. When the young academic asked which kind of ‘alternatives’ she had in mind, the experienced academic replied: “well, you know, write about Chavez and the ALBA”.

Different experiences of regionalism have produced different explanations about their benefits and costs, driving forces and agents, objectives and strategies. While some might emphasize the positive side that the harmonization of phytosanitary standards could have for consumers in a given region, for example, others might highlight the negative consequences for the diversity of products and local economies. Such different perspectives have informed the making and re-making of regional institutions, mechanisms, forums and agreements and highlight what regionalisms are: contested political projects driven by state and market actors, as well as communities around the world, which are transforming regional units located in particular geographic areas.

During the last two decades in the Americas, the emphasising of economic liberalization in relation to regionalism has been a prime concern for wider sectors and groups within civil society. Again and again, such actors are (re)presented in the mass media as opponents of this policy option. Yet, less has been said about the alternatives they have put forward and how some have been incorporated into official policies. Some argue that civil society initiatives have facilitated a gradual shift from the emphasis on economic liberalization towards development, social cohesion and capacity building: one interpretation of good governance. For many of these groups, however, trade and services liberalization policies need to be abandoned in favour of gender sensitive, community-based and environmentally
sustainable regionalisms if regionalism is to benefit marginalized sectors of society in the Global South. Not unexpectedly, this position has raised key issues regarding power and resistance in the international political economy and has stirred heated debates among scholars, practitioners and members of civil society. To date, few systematic attempts have been made to map these debates and develop a comparative analysis, despite the relevance these could have for the long-term sustainability of regionalism.

Feminist and gender perspectives

Studies of the networked activism in the Americas, that opposes trade and services liberalization while emphasising regionalism, have already produced interesting contributions from different theoretical and epistemological stands.¹ These include feminist and gender studies that have incorporated civil society actors’ diverse experiences and proposals as part of a commitment to building up policy-relevant alternatives to trade and services liberalization. In the process, they have made explicit the implications of trade and services liberalization for gender relations and for gender-sensitive development.² One limitation of this work is that it rarely refers to the specific nature of these implications under conditions of non-consolidated democratic transitions, which still characterize regions and sub-regions in the global South.

Liberal democratic perspectives

Other studies have been produced from a liberal democratic perspective, and these display serious explanatory limitations.³ For example, they pay too much attention to the ‘impacts’ of civil society actors without considering how structural conditions drive and/or constrain these interventions. Five important implications derive from this. First, this literature tends

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to see social transformation as a product of purposeful ‘actors’, to the extent that the making and re-making of regions is a product of their interventions. Second, civil society is taken as an individualistically-oriented expression of ‘private’ interests, which implies a purposeful and rational behaviour without room for unexpected, unplanned, ‘irrational’ attitudes and behaviour. Third, the context in which networked activism is analysed - characterised as ‘opportunity structures’ - portrays a given or fixed political market place. Accordingly, citizen groups opposing or supporting open regionalism in the form of NAFTA, FTAA, and CAFTA are seen only to demand responses in the form of governmental or inter-governmental regimes or regulations. In relation to the last point, a fourth implication is that liberal approaches tend to analyse ‘change’ in terms of possible steps/policies/ regimes. Civil society “interventions” are successful, therefore, if these influence the implementation or reform of particular policies. Other sorts of ‘outcomes’, such as the process of building citizenship through participation are not considered relevant if no policy outcome is achieved. And fifth, as this literature is heavily focused on policy outcomes achieved by civil society groups, it has oversimplified or simply ignored those structural conditions that drive or constrain ‘impacts’. As a result, this literature has neglected class, gender and powerful international economic structures that restrict the involvement of actors and groups to those few that can be organised within them.

In addressing these limitations, numerous scholars interested in civil society and regionalism in the Americas acknowledge that particular structural settings are deeply intertwined with networked activism on regionalism. A careful examination of the dominant structural forces that provoke social forces critical of contemporary regionalisms – in particular, those conditions of globalisation that activate agency potentialities – is therefore generally included. Accordingly, groups and organizations in civil society are analysed in relation to a particular historical context characterised by changes in governance – including decentralisation, privatisation and regionalisation; socio-economic neo-liberal restructuring and long-term political democratisation. This, it is argued, helps us show that some sectors of civil society (but not all) have been able to engage in the political economy of regionalism. Such ‘unequal engagement’ is often underestimated by mainstream liberal literature on civil society and regionalism.
Neo-Gramscian perspectives

Then there is the neo-Gramscian literature on social movements, which a number of scholars see as useful for conceptualising those structural transformations that have stimulated social forces critical of open regionalism in the Americas. This literature on resistance and social movements has conceptualised agency, however, either as the product of powerful structures or as constituting these structures, and thus, hardly provides an adequate perspective for understanding the complexity of networked activisms in regionalism. For example, neo-Gramscian literature tends to address ‘agency’ from the perspective of the structures (the whole) and, as a result, these approaches portray ‘agency’ as unproblematic and unified ‘actors’ - just as liberal approaches do - rather than explain them by taking into account their contradictions and diversity.

It seems necessary, therefore, to advance a critical engagement with this approach and posit some ways to overcome the limitations that derive from agency being conceptualised solely as either power or resistance. The diversity and contradictions of networked activism need to be thoroughly conceptualised without descending into voluntarism and structural determinisms. The alternatives explained below are advanced with this in mind.

Taking as a point of departure Gramsci’s dialectic view of the realm of civil society (the whole) to characterise one of its associational expressions (networked activism), it is possible to understand the latter as expressions of both power and resistance in the making and re-making of regionalisms. Accordingly, networked activisms might be treated as part of the social responses produced by the global political economy that resist, oppose, reproduce and stabilise the status quo in the making and remaking of formal and informal regional units and regional transactions. Moreover, networked activisms as an expression of both power and resistance need to be understood as ‘moments’ within the contemporary dynamics of social participation, resistance and organisation in the global economy. On the one hand, this double conceptualisation helps to critically examine the particular conjunctures and structural conditions that shape or stimulate critical social forces on regionalism. On the other hand, it opens up the possibility to understand that networked activism can, in

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particular conjunctures, perform as oppositional forms of networked resistance in relation to exclusionary and homogenising policy frameworks on regionalism.

Two additional explanatory limitations of neo-Gramscian accounts of how civil society is understood need to be addressed. First, this social realm has been understood in functionalist terms. In other words, civil society, its institutions and networked associational expressions, actors and impacts are simply functional to the reproduction of capitalism or any other hegemonic expression (e.g. socialism, western culture, male domination, or universalism). Yet, networked activism on regionalism has, for example, contributed to encouraging solidarity and a sense of community within civil society and as such cannot be understood solely from a functionalist perspective. A non-functionalist perspective on civil society might, therefore, see forces of ‘solidarity from below’ as constituting a relevant and open-ended transformation in itself. This is particularly relevant in a conjuncture of ascendant neo-liberal hegemony, depoliticisation and the commodification of public and private life.

Second, neo-Gramscian literature has often taken for granted the institutions of a ‘modern’ civil society, at least in a domestic or national dimension. It has also taken as a given the realm of civil society and its ‘modern’ institutions, including the numerous factors that have traditionally obstructed the growth of associational life outside of state corporative structures, their institutionalisation and effective protection. This has been seriously under-analysed. The characteristics of the realm of civil society, therefore, need to be incorporated into the analysis on networked activism on regionalism as first order questions.

**Alternative Regionalisms**

In recent years, activist-academics in the Americas have been committed to reflecting on, and acting in relation to, the purposes of regionalism – asking *who really gains?* Mainstream regional studies have been exposed for failing to systematize and disseminate specific civil society proposals on regionalism that could potentially contribute to informing thinking on governance and the overall functioning of the global economy. The accumulated knowledge and experiences of civil society forces opposing trade and services liberalisation and emphasising regionalism show us not only that more attention for their specific proposals is
required, but also how these proposals are profoundly linked to notions of an empowered participatory regionalism.\(^v\)

Inter-sectoral dialogue on regionalisms between practitioners and academics has proved central to advancing conceptualisations of what is here named ‘alternative regionalisms’, as an attempt to specify non-traditional, and thus less visible, mechanisms, processes, agents and structures involved in the making and re-making of regions across the globe. This concept seeks to highlight that different paradigms inform physical-geographical, political economic and/or ideational regional constructs and in so doing, it exposes key limitations of state-centric and capital-centric explanations of regionalisms that could be addressed and contested. An example of these limitations is the fascination for regional political and economic institutions and/or national leaders (including politicians, activists or entrepreneurs) as THE solitary makers of regions and regionalism. This perspective tends to neglect structural conditions, long-term ideational or cultural trends and/or less spectacular and more informal agents of regionalism.

As an abstract construct, alternative regionalisms, therefore, attempts to capture shifting patterns of relations that develop between networked activism and, often reluctant, intra-state networks concerned with regional governance. So, it is not simply about everything that is not mainstream, as these interrelations might include mutual denial and distrust, co-optation and resistance, and even “copy and paste” approaches, whereby governments and private actors simply adopt key ideas heralded by civil society groups in their discourses.

To date, the nature of these interrelations is an analytical space that has been largely ignored in debates about new or open regionalism, regionalization and regional integration. Paying some attention to this might shed new light on the complex relationships among an array of social actors and structures in inter-regional politics.

Since its inception, regional studies (formerly known as area studies) and development studies have been interlinked in various ways and it would seem necessary to re-start this

interdisciplinary dialogue to specify the ‘alternative’ nature of regionalisms.\textsuperscript{vii} In view of this, the contributions on the politics of alternative development produced by critical development studies are relevant to understanding \textit{for whom} regionalisms are intended. \textsuperscript{viii} Among others, feminist economics work on alternative and diverse political economies and communities are central to exploring non-capitalist mechanisms and expressions of the economy that have been invisible to traditional analyses of economic integration, such as the so-called care economy as well as informal and criminal macro-regional and inter-regional networks. \textsuperscript{viii} Finally, critical approaches to regional studies, global governance and everyday international political economy frameworks are also of key importance in understanding the regional, national, local, and personal effects of regionalisms.\textsuperscript{ix} This is, as the title of this brief presentation suggests, a research agenda that is still in its infancy, however.