

Out of the Blue: The Pacific Rim as a Region

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In 1993, in advance of what was to be the first Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leader's summit, United States president Bill Clinton gave a lecture at Waseda University in Japan. In his speech, Clinton called for the creation of a "community of the Pacific" (Ravenhill 2001, 94). The idea of a Pacific community is neither Clinton's nor the Democratic Party's invention. In the previous decade Ronald Reagan had already used it, going even beyond Clinton's call, by referring to the 21st century as the Pacific's century (Department of State Bulletin 84, 18; Kohona 1986, 399). But this prophecy concerning the Great Ocean was not new in the 1980s then either. In 1900 US Secretary of State John Hay wrote: "the Mediterranean is the ocean of the past, the Atlantic the ocean of the present and the Pacific is the ocean of the future" (McGee and Watters 1997, 4). In a more general manner, as Christopher Coker has observed, what has made the notion of the "Century of the Pacific" so plausible is that it is consistent with the idea, popularized by Hegel, that the spirit of civilization is moving toward that part of the globe (2003, 33). Thus, the century of the Pacific has become a kind of *zeitgeist*.

In this paper I undertake a conceptual, historical, and theoretical journey through the "Pacific Rim" or "Asia-Pacific," as it has been called more recently. Although I will question the utility of the term, I want to make clear at the outset that I am not belittling the literature that employs it, and nor am I suggesting that the term should be anathema. My purpose is only to undertake a critical survey of "the Pacific." As in any trip, however, one

needs a starting point. But what is the starting point of the Pacific Rim, that geographic zone that Arif Dirlik (1992, 15) compared to Pascal's sphere: "with periphery indeterminable and a center that may be anywhere"? In this paper I will attempt to provide an answer to this seemingly elusive matter.

I. Terra Firma

It would seem that the continental referent of the second term, Asia-Pacific, could assist in starting our journey. After all, as Gerald Houseman has suggested, the term "is meaningless in all but a strictly geographic sense," and it makes more sense when it is "confine[d] to the Asian nations that border the Pacific and other nearby countries" (1995, ix). Nevertheless, a sense of uncertainty besets us: what exactly is being referred by "Asia"? Moreover, what is the epistemological legitimacy of anchoring a concept on the division of land when, subject to closer scrutiny, the connection appears to be a frayed rope.

As geographers Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen have pointed out in their now classic *The Myth of Continents*, even in the field of geology continental divisions are of minor utility. According to them, "If continents are simply irrelevant for physical geography, however, they can be positively pernicious when applied to human geography. Pigeonholing historical and cultural data into a continental framework fundamentally distorts basic spatial patterns, leading to misapprehensions of cultural and social differentiation" (1997, 36). For Lewis and Wigen, "Nowhere is such misrepresentation more clearly exemplified than in the supposed continental distinction between Europe and Asia" (34-35). Indeed, the continental status of Europe is based on such a conceptual scheme, and not on geological evidence of any sort (36).

It is not surprising, as Lewis and Wigen note, that "Neither 'Asia-Pacific' nor 'Pacific Rim' has yet joined the roster of geographers' standard world regions, but both have gained wide currency in journalism and social science research." There are, of course, good reasons for the geographers' reticence. Lewis and Wigen argue that the term "Asia-Pacific" centers on East and Southeast Asia, sometimes stretching south to include New Zealand and Australia, and sometimes reaching as far as the Eurasian core of India, and eastern Russia. The

expression “Pacific Rim,” on the other hand, is an equally plastic concept. Theoretically it includes all the landmasses bordering the Pacific Ocean, but conceptually it is anchored in the United States-Japan trade link (204). As Richard Higgott, Richard Leaver, and John Ravenhill note, “the Japanese-US commercial relationship” provides “the very backbone of the Pacific economy” (1993, 2).

The lack of consensus about the geographic referent of the two terms in question is significant, to cite a few illustrative examples from the international press. The *New York Times*, for example, brings news together under the term “Asia Pacific,” which refers basically to the countries of East Asia, but sometimes extends all the way to Afghanistan. For the *International Herald Tribune*, the “Asia/Pacific” [sic] ends in India. No Pacific shore country of the Americas belongs to Asia Pacific, according to these two periodicals. In the academic literature, the lack of consensus on what countries to include under the terms “Asia Pacific” and “Pacific Rim” is also the norm. For the *Asia-Pacific Development Journal* the region has little to do with the *Pacific Rim*. Its scope encompasses New Zealand, Australia, Japan, China, and the Koreas, all traditional Pacific Rim countries, but it extends in the less conventional cases, to India and Afghanistan, and goes all the way to what is still considered the periphery of Europe: Turkey. On the other hand, countries on the south-eastern side of the ocean, are *not* included.

Similarly, while to judge from the map illustration its cover the *Pacific Review* defines “Asia-Pacific” as including all countries in the Pacific Ocean, its focus is on the Asian part of the Pacific and the United States. In the last two years that journal has published only one article dealing explicitly with Latin America (Faust and Franke 2002). The tendency to reduce Asia-Pacific to its Asian component is widespread. For Richard Stubbs the Asia-Pacific is limited to a few countries of East Asia; likewise, for Michael Aho the Asia-Pacific is equivalent to East Asia. Stephen Cohen, on the other hand, following the more conventional line, treats the Pacific Rim as synonymous with Asia Pacific—but his research covers only ten Asian countries, plus the United States (2002).

Furthermore, while some specialists on regionalism with positivist inclinations simply take the region as a given (Aggarwal 1993), without bothering to define it, others of a rather postmodern bent explicitly refuse to define it. Philip Kelly and Kris olds argue that since “Perhaps more than any other world region, the boundaries of the Asia-Pacific are indeterminate and open to contestation and social construction ... we therefore avoid the need to place definitive boundaries on the locus of our attention” (1999, 2).

The terminological confusion just sketched is not surprising. Over a decade ago, Higgott noted that “While the Pacific is much more than an ocean, it is not a coherent region” (1993, 291). Similarly, Rave Palat has observed that “The very catholicity of terms such as Asia Pacific ... empties them of all analytical coherence by collapsing the enormous social heterogeneity of some 70 percent of the world population who live within these designations” (1996, 304). This conceptual heterogeneity is telling in that, to go back to solid ground in this erratic journey, “Scholarly writing on the Pacific Rim has historically been concerned with the integrity of continents as the basis for the constructions of regions” (1997, 12). As a consequence, it would be better to start our itinerary again, but this time not from *terra firma*.

II. The World of Ideas

2004 marked the fiftieth anniversary of Arthur Whitaker’s *The Western Hemisphere Idea: Its Rise and Decline* (1954). Its author argued that by the end of the nineteenth century the western hemisphere had constituted itself into a region of the international arena, that is, as a “system of interests” independent from the European one. More concretely, with the “Western Hemisphere Idea,” Whitaker referred to “the proposition that the peoples of this Hemisphere stand in a special relationship to one another which sets them apart from the rest of the world” (1). The creation of this region was, fundamentally, a political project of the elites of the “new world” (1).

It is worth noting, however, that this integrating project implied neither the existence of a community of interests amongst the states of the Americas, nor an institutional framework.

As Whitaker noted, “the distinction between the idea and its various political expressions... should be constantly kept in mind” (5).

The world of ideas as a starting point for this excursion through the Pacific is germane because one scholar of the phenomenon under consideration, Dirlik, has recently applied the concept developed by the US historian, Whitaker, to the Pacific Rim. Dirlik asserts that what Whitaker said about the process of regional development in the Americas “may be said of the ‘Pacific region’ idea” (1992, 62). He argues that although the precise membership of the region in question is a matter of debate, that does not prevent it from being a region (75). However, Dirlik himself notes that the Pacific Region—unlike the American continent—“emerged as primarily an economic region” (76).

This last feature should alert us to the dangers of conceptual extrapolation. For Whitaker the creation of the hemispheric region was fundamentally a political project around a specific idea: the constitution of a *system of interests* independent from still dominant European ones. As Dirlik notes, in the case of the Asia Pacific, not only is the diverse membership a matter of dispute, but the engine of the regionalization process is of an economic character. But ideas and their crystallization, be it in the American land mass or in the fluid Pacific, are hardly the work of merchants; a political *ethos* is needed to take them to safe harbor.

The problem is not that the ideational realm, the world of ideas, is a poor departure point for a trip through Asia Pacific. The problem is taking ideas as mere palaver. It might sound paradoxical, but a good deal of the postmodern literature, in spite of the importance it attaches to discourse analysis and deconstruction, is guilty of precisely this mistake.

Dirlik’s work is a case in point. In his edited volume *What is in a Rim: Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea* (1988a), he and his collaborators rightly question the conventional treatment of the Pacific Rim as a natural region. Nonetheless, they assume that the region has materialized simply because some scholars and politicians use the term constantly as part of their rhetoric. All regions are social constructs—that is plainly true. What is questionable is the assumption that *a* discourse has the potential to create a region.

With regard to the region under inquiry, Kenneth Pyle has pointed out that “in the Asia-Pacific region, unlike Europe, there is no historical basis for an international state system: there have been few multilateral organizations in the region; there is too much diversity; there are no common cultural traditions; Asians prefer an organic approach rather than an a priori, rules-based approach” (1997, 98). Mere discourse, therefore, is not going to produce this region.

Unlike human beings, not all ideas—or all terms—were created equal. Perhaps that explains, for instance, the failed attempt in the first half of the twentieth century by the US State Department officials to include Iceland in the western hemisphere. As then president Roosevelt made them notice, “the strain on the public idea of geography would be too severe” (Whitaker 1954, 160). Words are important—and discourse is certainly partially constitutive of social reality—but they have certain limits. The ideas that animate any discourse must be validated by social practice. Socially shared ideas—which Durkheim called “collective representations”—produce useful constructs that might help us move further in our intellectual excursion. However, assuming that the mere enunciation of concepts has constitutive effects does not take us very far.

III. The Rim of History, or the History of the Rim

The third attempt at putting to sea departs from a historic standpoint. The Pacific, as various specialists have rightly noted, is a European construct. Dirlik, for instance, has observed that, “From the very beginning, it was the Europeans who gave meaning to an area in terms of European (later Euro American) concepts, visions, and fantasies” (1998a, 4-5). It is no coincidence, then, that the English weekly *The Economist* has referred to the South Pacific as a sort of Eden whose existence “is important for the mental well-being of the world” (Dirlik 1998b, 352). More to the point, as Bruce Cumings has put it, “‘Rim’ is a Euro American construct, an invention just like the steam engine” (1998, 55).

With the rise of the United States—and its consequent metamorphosis into a Pacific power—the North American influence in delimiting the Asian Pacific became paramount. Later on would come the advent of Japan as the only Asian Great Power, and the

proclamation of the “Asian Co-prosperity Sphere,” which led to two major powers disputing each other’s hegemony in the area. Nevertheless, the 1945 defeat of the goose leading the Asian flock, as the metaphor of Japanese economist Kaname Akamatsu had it (1962), and the turning of the United States into one of the two poles of international politics, did away with any doubts about who was the true hegemon in the Pacific. As one US Secretary of State described it, that hegemon was like “a fan spread wide, with its base in North America and radiating west across the Pacific” (Baker 1991/2, 5).

Nevertheless, in some respects favorable treatment the United States gave to its clientele on the other side of the Great Ocean had some unexpected effects. Among the most remarkable ones were the re-emergence of Japan as an economic powerhouse in the 1970s, and the advent of the so-called Asian “tigers” (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan). To an important extent, the transformation of these countries into industrialized, highly exporting economies—with the United States being one of their main markets—generated wider interest in what would become the Asia-Pacific. That said, the change was gradual. For instance, “Southeast Asia” started to acquire prominence in geopolitical terms in the 1950s, when President Ike Eisenhower approved the directive leading the security apparatus of the United States to consider the countries included under the Southeast Asian rubric as an area subject to a common policy (Singh 2000, 134).

But the conception of the region evolved. Hari Singh argues that after the revision of the US global objectives as expressed in the 1969 Nixon Doctrine, “the United States began to conceive of its theatre of operations in the wider context of a ‘Pacific rim’ strategy, which was essentially a retreat to its traditional role as a naval power in the Pacific” (2000 138). Five years later, Gerald Ford would articulate what came to be known as the “Pacific Doctrine”—although it is worth noting that in the speech he gave, the understanding of the Pacific was limited to the bilateral relationship between his country and a few countries of Asia.

Nevertheless, it was not until the economic “miracle” experienced by several of the so-called Tiger economies became evident that the discourse on the “Pacific Rim” properly

emerged in the United States. As David Linna has noted, the official U.S. interest in economic “cooperation” in the Pacific originates in the late 1970s (1995, 825). In 1979 the House of Representatives held a series of hearings, to which several experts on the nascent “region” were summoned, about “The Pacific Community Idea.” The motive for the interest of legislators in the area in question was crystal-clear: the impressive economic achievements of Japan and the “tigers,” as well as the increasing trade relationship between the United States and these countries (Higgott, Leaver, and Ravenhill 1993, 1). Indeed, Lester Wolf, president of the sub-committee on Asia and Pacific Affairs, said at the hearings’ opening on 18 July 1979: “A number of factors have contributed to the gradual emergence of the Pacific community Idea. First and foremost has been the economic development of the region ... U.S. trade with the Asia-Pacific region today exceeds our trade with all of Western Europe” (U.S. House of Representatives 1979a, 1).

Paradoxically, within this economic success lies a weakness of the otherwise successful creation of the Pacific on the part of the Euro-Americans. Toward the end of the twentieth century there was an area of the world shaped by the former colonial powers—an area that was not conceived two centuries earlier. The contradiction is that this same region came to challenge the hegemony of its progenitors (Dirlik 1998a, 6-7). That is why, as Manuel Castells has written, “‘the Pacific’ is a sort of cipher which expresses the decline of Western economic and technological supremacy” (1999, 244; my translation).

Be that as it may, toward the end of the 1970s it was evident that some East Asian countries required the Western hegemon to pay special attention to them. In the US House of Representatives hearings of July 18 1979 it was stated that the “central premise that the United States is a Pacific nation and its future is inextricably bound with the future of the Asia-Pacific region” (U.S. House of Representatives, 1979a, 1). How exactly the Pacific community was to be comprised, however, was still left to be defined. For Cumings, in the late 1970s, “‘Pacific Rim’ was a discourse searching out its incipient material base, targeted upon exporters with Asian markets, or importers of Asian products” (1998, 53). On this point the experts convoked by Congress agreed. Thus, Everett Kleinhans, president of the East-West Center said: “Certainly the very concept of a Pacific community is very much in

the early stages of both theoretical planning and practical association building.” What was needed, therefore, was an open attitude, and for this reason Kleinhans himself recommended “a kind of *creative ambiguity* in our use of Pacific community” (U.S. House of Representatives, 1979b, 100; emphasis added).

Similarly, in his preface to a directory of institutions in the “region,” Abraham Lowenthal argues that “the very notion of the Pacific Rim has been more a mental construct than a political reality” (1998, xv). Yet this is a very broad mental construct indeed, for *International Policy Institutions Around the Pacific Rim* (1998) includes organizations from Argentina and Brazil. More recently, Neantro Saavedra has noted that “other geographic areas,” such as the Southern Cone Common Market (Mercosur) formed by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, could be included when considering the political economy of the Pacific Rim (2004, 78).

Such approaches return once more to the realm of projects and ideas, the Pacific Community idea. If it is clear from what historical context the discourse around the Pacific Rim emerges, and why it is talked about, nonetheless the theoretical value of this ubiquitous yet fleeting concept—which starts to look like the Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll’s novel—is still in question. I wouldn’t want to think that, just as Alice fell asleep under the tree, I might have inadvertently fallen into the conceptual waters of the Pacific, adrift, and not started the promising and promised conceptual, historic, and theoretical tour through the Rim. As a last resort, I turn now to three theories within the International Relations discipline that may better help traverse the Pacific Rim.

IV. Theoretical Rafts

The concept of the region—exactly the kind of animal the Asia Pacific is supposed to be—has turned into one of the buzzwords in this area of knowledge since the emergence, in the 1980s, of the so called “new regionalism.” As Greg Fry has noted,

region has multiple political roles. It is sometimes an independent political agent, it sometimes acts like a political community, and it is sometimes called up as a political identity. It is always an important arena, and a

significant analytical and policy category. Each of these roles has arguably become more important since the end of the Cold War, suggesting that the 'new regionalism' does increasingly matter as a locus of world politics. (2000, 124)

However, one should proceed cautiously in the Pacific. Barry Buzan has warned us that, "If we are to consider this huge expanse as a region, then we must identify what ties it together sufficiently to justify differentiating it from the rest of the international system" (1998, 69).

Three contending approaches elucidate the phenomenon of concern here: Realism, in its Hegemonic Stability Theory rendition; Liberal Institutionalism; and Constructivism. For better or worse, students of world politics tend to prefer concrete referents, especially if they possess an institutional apparatus, to conceptual entelechies. Fortunately, one institution, APEC, does assure that the Pacific Rim offers some buoyancy. APEC epitomizes the Pacific Rim partly because it brings together the "economies," as its contracting parties are known, from either side of the ocean, in addition to others located in the body of water itself.¹ Thus, Ravenhill, author of one of the best books on the organization, *APEC and the Construction of Pacific Rim Regionalism*, uses APEC and Asia-Pacific interchangeably (2001, 233). Similarly, the editors of a recent book on APEC assert that the creation of this institution allows us to talk about regionalism in Asia-Pacific (Rüland, Manske and Draguhn 2002, xii).

It is appropriate to present a brief sketch of the creation of this unique association, before inquiring into what each of the theories mentioned above says about the construction of a region in the Pacific Rim.

In the Beginning...

The idea of creating a transpacific institution originated four decades ago. In 1965 Japanese economist Kojima Kiyoshi proposed the creation of a Pacific Free Trade Area, which was to include, in addition to his country, those of Southeast Asia, plus New Zealand, Australia,

¹ Although the "fluid" contours of the region were still evident a few years after APEC's founding. For instance, at the third ministerial meeting in Seoul in November 1991, non-Pacific countries such as Argentina and India applied for membership in the transpacific organization (Uscanga 2001, 11).

Canada, and the United States. The project did not prosper at that time, but the idea remained in a latent state. A decade later Japanese Prime-Minister Ohira Masayoshi and his Australian counterpart Malcolm Fraser called for an international conference in Canberra, which led to the creation of the Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference (PECC). From that moment on, the Australians kept alive the project of creating an organization that would group the countries of a Pacific Rim still-in-the-making. Significantly, the Australian proposal considered the exclusion of the United States, since the members of the Association of South East Asian Nations, ASEAN, feared the potential hegemonic ambitions of Washington. In July 1989, after U.S. Secretary of State James Baker stated that any economic multilateral project in the region without the participation of his country was doomed to failure (Dosch 2000, 95), the Australians were able to convince ASEAN members to agree to US membership in the nascent body (Otto 2000, 49). In 1989 APEC was formally established in Canberra. Thus, the transpacific institution materialized as a sign of the times, in the very year that the Berlin Wall came down. As Valera Quisumbing has put it, the integration project in Asia Pacific is one whose “whose putative parents are Japanese and American and whose midwife is Australian” (Dirlik 1998a, 8).

Unfortunately, the new-born organization was not particularly charming, as is suggested by the fact that its creators did not rush to gather around it. Based on two clearly opposed approaches to economic integration, APEC evinces the integration problems experienced by quote different societies—which are, in the final analysis, where the member economies are embedded (Ravenhill 2001, 103). Yet, precisely because it has made transpacific cleavages evident, APEC epitomizes the Pacific Rim. The transpacific organization to date does not seem to have constituted itself into a bridge between the eastern and western shores of the Great Ocean, let alone create another region out of existing ones. As Saavedra notes, “The process of trans-pacific convergence is possibly the most debatable [of regionalization processes], and undoubtedly the weakest, and the one with the least agents committed to its success” (2004, 79).

This point may be illustrated briefly by referring to the cases of the two Latin American countries with the most pro-active Pacific Rim policy: Chile and Mexico (Faust and Franke 2002). Both were admitted to the Pacific Basin Economic Council in 1989, both have been

members of the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council since 1991, and both have belonged to APEC since 1993. Chile has arguably been more serious in developing a state policy towards Asia-Pacific countries, and has also been the forerunner in the matter (Guttman and Laughlin 1990). In the commercial realm, for instance, Chile's exports to APEC members amounted to 56.5 percent of its total exports in 2002, while its imports from that group of countries in the same year were 40.7 of total imports. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that over half of the trade with APEC members (52 percent in the case of exports and 56.5 in the case of imports) stayed in the Americas. Transpacific trade amounts to only a quarter of Chilean foreign trade, and two thirds of it is with two countries: Japan and China.²

The Mexican case is even more illustrative of the frailty of the "Pacific Rim factor" in Latin America. Mexico remains firmly anchored—economically and politically—in North America. Its acceptance into APEC can be largely explained by this fact. As Keiichi Tsunekawa has written, "Mexico was not admitted to APEC as a result of having close linkages with Asian countries. It owes its admission instead to recognition of its status as a North American economy with membership in NAFTA" (in Faust and Franke 2002, 312). Washington backing of the Mexican application was indeed decisive for its admittance into the transpacific body (Uscanga 2001, 12).

Although Mexico's trade with APEC countries amounts to approximately 90 percent of its total foreign trade (92.4 of its exports and 87.5 of its imports in 2000), the United States alone participates in about 80 percent of that trade (88.7 and 73.1 of Mexican exports and imports, respectively, for the same year; International Monetary Fund, Direction of Trade Statistics, 2001). Policy developments in Mexico confirm the scant attention it gives to countries on the other side of the Pacific, with a few exceptions, such as China, Japan, and New Zealand. For instance, the Asia-Pacific department has been downgraded under the current Fox administration, and has been placed under the general directorate of Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Pacific. As Jörg Faust and Uwe Franke observe, although "The original intent [of Mexico's Asia Pacific policy] had been to upgrade the importance of ties between Mexico and Asia Pacific in relation to its links with the United States ...

² My calculations are based on official Chilean Central Bank figures.

[but] actual developments led to the exact opposite of what was originally intended” (Faust and Franke 2002, 316).³

But leaving aside the traits of the transpacific organization, or its often assumed role as a transpacific bridge, it is an undeniable fact that, at the end of the 1980s, a bridge was already in existence. The question now is how to make theoretical sense of its conception and birth.

Realist Rim

For realist and neorealist perspectives, which emphasize egoistic state actors and power resources, the hegemonic stability theory is apparently the most plausible explanation for the creation of an international regime in the Pacific. The existence of an hegemonic power in the international system increases the probabilities of an open and stable economic system worldwide. The assumption is that the hegemon will bear the costs of creating such a system not for altruistic reasons, but for its own interest.

However, for Aggarwal, the extension and diversity of actors in the huge ocean is not conducive for the United States to incur the short-term costs that the creation of a solid international regime would imply (1993, 1039). Jörn Dosch observes that “America’s foreign policy attitude towards multilateral institution-building has indeed been the single most crucial factor determining the outcomes of multilateral cooperation in the area... open dialogue cooperation [such as APEC] has never really exceeded the stage of providing a loose framework for an exchange of ideas” (2000, 107). The neorealist Joseph Grieco has recognized that “the concept... of hegemonic leadership cannot, by itself, account for regionalism itself nor for the variations in its character” (1996, 178). Similarly, Robert

³ The state of affairs in other Latin American Pacific Rim countries is obviously even more dismaying, to judge by a cursory review of their government’s web pages (particularly those of the ministries of trade and foreign affairs). In general terms, it can be surmised that Asia-Pacific does not exist for the five central American countries, while Ecuador and Colombia are aware that such a region is supposed to exist. The other three Pacific Rim countries, APEC-members Chile, Mexico, and Peru, on the other hand, at least have information regarding “Asia-Pacific” and APEC on their government websites. Likewise, an analogous exercise in the sites of the four “tigers” plus Australia, China, Japan, and New Zealand evinces a general disdain for Latin America. Only the last three countries’ web pages present information on policy and administrative efforts aimed at the region in their foreign ministry web pages (which, in the case of New Zealand, is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade).

Gilpin, one of the founders of this approach, claims that “although the Asia-Pacific region has developed with amazing rapidity, many of the conditions that have supported greater economic and political regionalization elsewhere do not yet exist here... Mutual political interests seem to be totally absent as a motivating force for greater regional cooperation” (1995, 18). More to the point, Ravenhill points out that hegemonic stability theory is not very useful in explaining the emergence of APEC (2001, 9-12).

Institutional Rim

If realist navigation instruments are not helpful in this voyage through the Rim, liberal institutionalism, which privileges transaction-cost-reduction in interstate dealings as the engine for integration processes, would seem more appropriate to the task. According to this critical stance, self-interested state actors have incentives to collaborate in the creation of the institutions needed to increase their welfare, or, failing that, a willing and capable leader (the hegemon of the previous theoretical perspective) takes responsibility for providing the public goods necessary for reducing transaction costs. The emphasis on taking advantage of the potential of international intercourse is relevant because, as already noted, economic transactions in the Pacific Rim have increased notably in the last decades. Therefore, a liberal approach would expect the creation of institutions in order to manage such interdependence. As Ravenhill observes: “In the Asia-Pacific region in the 1980s, the growth of interdependence not only changed governments’ attitudes toward regional collaboration but had a profound effect on their thinking about the shape that the region should take” (2001, 72). The founding economies of APEC decided then to limit themselves to the economic realm.

Nevertheless, Carsten Otto stresses that it is worth asking “whether there ever was a common understanding concerning APEC’s economic objectives” (2000, 50). On the basis of a liberal stand on international regimes, Otto concludes that “APEC is no free-trade regime at all” (61). The question seems to be moot as to whether or not APEC would become “a community in the popular sense of a ‘big family’ of like minded economies” (Berger 1999, 1016), as a liberal-functionalist perspective, such as the one taken by the Eminent Persons Group, indicates. Economic interdependence, says David Timberman, “is

a necessary but not sufficient condition for establishing a common feeling of interdependence within the region” (1981, 596). As a dissenting State Department official put it: “The growing sense of community is not rooted in economic interdependence. It is rooted in political and power considerations” (596). The Liberal approach, then, does not seem to endorse consideration of the Pacific Rim as an analytical category.

Constructed Rim

Since the matter of transpacific economic transactions raises the issue of community, do constructivist approaches help explain a Pacific Rim that looks more and more like *El Dorado*? For starters, constructivism would seem to be better suited to describe the emergence of Asia Pacific as a region, even if it lacks the geographical attributes mentioned earlier, since this theoretical approach states that all regions are socially constructed. As Peter Katzenstein has put it, “geographic designations... are not ‘real,’ ‘natural,’ or ‘essential.’ They are socially constructed and politically contested” (1997, 7).

The Pacific Rim would thus appear to be yet another case of a constructed region. However, as a structural or “third image” approach, constructivism emphasizes the socially constructed identities and norms that make society—be it national or international—hang together. But these norms and identities should have real effects in order to find a place in the constructivist discourse. Among these effects would undoubtedly be the construction of mutual interests, for as Manfred Mols says, “It is at this point that the story of a constructed region begins” (2000, 12).

When considering the Pacific Rim as a region, the apposite questions are: Is there a normative peculiarity distinguishing this alleged region? Do its members share an identity linking them to the supposed Pacific Rim project? Does a sense of community in the region therefore exist? If the answers to all three questions are affirmative, then it makes sense to talk about Asia-Pacific as a region from a constructivist standpoint; otherwise, one could talk about the Pacific Rim until one turns blue, with only inveterate optimists or a few confused postmodernists taking the discourse seriously.

Considering the empirical issue at stake, Shaun Breslin and his colleagues observe that in APEC “there is a clear disjuncture between the enthusiasm for the process [of integration] among regional corporate and bureaucratic elite and the disinterest, if not hostility, of the wider communities in many of the member states” (Breslin, Higgott, and Rosamond 2002); the most conspicuous transpacific institution is still limited to “transnational policy élites” (Higgott 1993, 298). Moreover, as Ravenhill has noted, “the evolution of APEC has arguably had the unintended consequence of weakening transpacific loyalties.” He also asserts that “Rather than contributing to the reinforcement of an Asia-Pacific identity, APEC itself, perversely, and in conjunction with the Asian financial crises, has had the opposite effect. It has encouraged the Asian members to see their interests as distinct from those of the West, and its Western members to differentiate themselves from the East Asian” (2001, 174 & 214).

As Gerald Segal argues in his *Rethinking the Pacific*, published when APEC was just taking its first steps, “There is no important cultural, ideological, political, economic, or even military sense in which it is particularly useful to talk of ‘the Pacific’” (1990, 377). Hence, as Castells notes, “there does not exist a region in the Pacific as a distinct or integrated entity and, consequently there will not be a Pacific century” (1999, 339; my translation). The constructivist raft, then, prefers to stay in port rather than venture into the shallow, theoretical waters of the Asia Pacific-as-a-region discourse.

Coming Full Circle, or Running Fast to Stay in the Same Place

This conceptual, historical, and theoretical journey in search of the Pacific Rim seems to have failed. I am back where I started. But this hurried circuit has at least shown that one should be wary of travelogues that describe wonderlands, that social constructs do not become meaningful just because academics and policy makers write and talk about them, and, most importantly, that regions in the world political economy do not appear out of the ether.

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