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Regional Environmental Governance: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Theoretical Issues,
Comparative Designs (REGov)

New environmental regionalism and sustainable development

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Abstract

This contribution is based on a set of reflections presented at the REGov Workshop. These reflections were offered as part of a panel discussion around the topic “New environmental regionalism.” Additional presentations provided in the context of this panel discussion include those of William Jackson, International Union for the Conservation of Nature (this volume) and Frédéric Giraut, University of Geneva (this volume). Webcasts of all presentations are available at <http://www.reg-observatory.org/outputs.html>.

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1. Framing a paradox

During the last two decades, many parts of the world have become veritable laboratories of economic, political, and spatial reconfiguration. The vast body of scholarship on European integration, for instance, has powerfully revealed the historical contingency of the state as a form of political organization, the socially constructed nature of political scales and borders, and the possibility for the emergence of new polities (Duchacek, 1986; Duchacek, Latouche & Stevenson, 1988; Brenner, 2004; Deas & Lord, 2006).

At the same time as Europe has simultaneously become more united and fragmented, strong and growing concerns over environmental degradation have reinforced questions about appropriate scales of action. In particular, the rapid rise to dominance of human-induced climate change as the most important environmental challenge has demonstrated the spatial specificity and significance of societal adaptation. In response to demands by policy makers around the world, the regional implications of climate change will be the central focus of the next report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, due to be released in 2014.

While rescaling environmental policy to better correspond with ecoregional boundaries is an idea that has been promoted for a long time, promoted already in the 19th century by John Wesley-Powell for the U.S. West, the so-

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called ‘new environmental regionalism’ refers to a more recent wave of initiatives focusing on mountain ranges (e.g. Alpine Convention), river basins (e.g. European Union Water Framework Directive), or marine water bodies (e.g. Baltic Sea) (Balsiger & VanDeveer, 2010; Balsiger, 2008). While some ecoregional initiatives originate in ambitious visions of geopolitical transformation, the majority of initiatives has been subject to extensive “bricolage” – practices of construction or creation that draw from a diverse range of things that happen to be available (Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Duymedjian & Rüling, 2010). Environmental concerns influence both regionalism as an ideology and regionalization as a manifest process. In moving from the former to the latter, however, pragmatism often sets in and compromises are made.

New environmental regionalism implies that it is principally for the purpose of *environmental* policy that this rescaling is pursued, that is for efforts to mitigate the negative consequences (externalities) of certain types of externalities such as water pollution. Ecoregional rescaling from the perspective of externalities presupposes the existence of other “fields of practice” or “functional spaces” (Frey & Eichenberger, 1996; Nahrath, 2007) that are not coterminous with the stock or flow dynamics of environmental phenomena. Prominent types of such other fields can be of a political-administrative nature (e.g. citizenship), an economic nature (e.g. trade patterns or production networks), or a social nature (collective identities). Hence, below the global scale, ecoregional rescaling always simultaneously *mitigates* the negative consequences of some externalities while potentially *exacerbating* those of others. For instance, while promoters of integrated water management typically recommend the establishment of new institutions at the hydrological basin level, existing bodies, even within the same sector, such as water supply or waste water treatment associations frequently operate at a different scale because their technical infrastructure transcends watersheds. Hence, the creation of new structures for different functional spaces may always entail the fragmentation of service delivery in another. The rise of ecoregionalism thus creates an important conundrum relating to the co-existence of multiple (functional) spaces.

If we take environmental, economic, and social policy domains as the most general types of domains or functional spaces, we are of course talking about the classic dimensions of sustainable development, which, despite all criticism leveled at its vagueness, embodies one of the politically and symbolically most compelling ideas that capture integrated well-being (cf. 2012 World Summit on Sustainable Development Rio+20). This train of thought thus leads to an interesting question: if we accept that environmental regionalism focuses on environmental problems and that their spatial reach is not coterminous with other types of challenges, then how can environmental regionalism be reconciled with sustainable development broadly understood as environmental, economic, and social policy integration?

2. Searching the forest for the trees

Where can we turn to find answers to this question? Looking at the field of (international) environmental politics immediately raises questions that stem from the field’s very definition. Not only does the bulk of work continue to focus on the global or national - at the expense of the regional – level, its emphasis on *environmental* politics often neglects the integral aspects of sustainable development. Indeed, if the last twenty years are any indication, the most prolific body of research has examined how environmental policy has been internationalized and, in the process, institutionalized in issue-specific domains – tellingly, today we are confronted with so-called “earth system governance” as a highly influential research brand that illustrates the evolution of functional differentiation.

In practice, there is an incredible diversity of regional initiatives, many of them of an ecoregional nature. If they were positioned in a three-dimensional space that is defined by three axes for environmental, economic, or social regionalisms, respectively, we would find that most contain some aspects of all sustainability dimensions. In other words, what in theory we think of as ecoregionalism, in practice is often more varied already.

Somewhere between the idealism (for better or worse) of environmental politics and the pragmatism of transboundary practice thus lies a space in which a plethora of actors negotiate the trade-offs between environmental, economic, and social goals. The question is therefore not just whether the new environmental regionalism is bricolage or profound geo-socio-political transformation, but what conditions shape the tangible and

intangible materials that new environmental regionalist bricoleurs can use. To begin to answer this question, I suggest, it is useful to turn to the relationship between boundary making and functional differentiation.

3. Boundary formation and functional differentiation

Although scholarly work on scale and rescaling has mushroomed in recent times, very little work in environmental politics has explicitly examined the relationship between transboundary region building and sustainable development. Casting the net more widely, however, attempts to explain processes of modern state making, bureaucratization, and European integration suggest that there is indeed such a link. This link turns our attention to the functionalization of state organization on the one hand, and territorial (re)structuring on the other. Regarding the former, Weber already proclaimed that bureaucracies are the most effective systems of organization precisely because of their extensive degree of specialization. Looking not only at the development of national bureaucracies but indeed at the evolution of international organizations tends to confirm the specialization.

With regard to territorial restructuring, we can gain inspiration from the “exit and voice” framework which combines the ideas of Stein Rokkan and Albert Hirschman (Hirschman, 1970; Rokkan, 1999; Rokkan & Urwin, 1983). Although Rokkan was almost exclusively concerned with the evolution (and diversification) of European nation states, this framework has recently enjoyed new popularity in analyses of European integration (Bartolini, 2005; Ferrera, 2005). According to these authors, territorial consolidation entails a trade (perhaps of a Faustian nature) between the possibility of political *exit* of peripheral actors and the provision of *voice* in *nationally* organized policy domains. In this view, what today are political entities that participate in cross-border cooperation at some point in the past agreed (or were forced) to join a state in return for the right to have a say in functionally segregated issue areas of that state’s organization. In more general terms, the exit-voice perspective posits that whenever territorial restructuring takes the form of a merger of previously separate units, the process of consolidation is necessarily accompanied by the functionalization of political and socio-economic and cultural life. Previously independent actors now assume representation (voice) in specialized national institutions, which today we recognize as the fragmented agency structure at the heart of many policy problems.

Can we imagine a reversal of this dynamic? That is, would the transformation (some say ‘unraveling’; see Hooghe & Marks, 2003) of the state system also be accompanied by a desegregation or reintegration of policy domains. This, it should be noted, is often a stated goal of subnational regional development initiatives and may be a logical correlate of the new environmental regionalism. It is also part of the paradox of new environmental regionalism insofar as the rescaling of cooperation to cross-border polities simultaneously involves a focus on environmental issues but entails the prospect of integrated policy making. Yet, more than ten years ago, in one of the few examples, Joachim Blatter looked at the Lake Constance Region between Switzerland, Germany, and Austria, as well as the Pacific Northwest Region between the U.S. and Canada – two ecoregions, depending on how narrowly or broadly one defines them (Blatter, 1997, 2000, 2004). Although he could confirm a growing trend of transboundary cooperation in many policy fields, he concluded that cross-border or interterritorial cooperation produces antagonistic communities and renders the search for sustainability more difficult.” In essence, he found that cross-border linkages most often center on sectoral focal points.

In my own work, I have looked at policy integration as a manifestation of sustainable development in a number of different subnational and transnational regions. My comparison of mountain regions in Switzerland and California, for instance, in some ways contradicts Blatter’s argument, for the rescaling of governance to the mountain region not only strengthened collective identity but also citizen-driven policy integration (conceptualized here as a stronger clustering of different issue areas among mountain constituents than among non-mountain constituents) (Balsiger, 2009). Importantly, this trend could only be observed at the temporal scale of decades, a point I will return to in my conclusion.

My reading of the evolution of the Alpine Convention could serve to make either argument (Balsiger, 2008). On the one hand, ecoregional rescaling has been pursued under the discursive auspices of sustainable mountain development. On the other hand, the legal structure of the Alpine Convention encompasses a series of issue-specific

protocols (forestry, agriculture, soil, transport, etc.). Moreover, the institutional location of Alpine Convention responsibility in member countries is almost exclusively with environmental ministries.

4. Arguments and Questions

Where does this leave us in our assessment of new environmental regionalism? First, I would argue that we should take seriously the relationship between boundary making and functional differentiation, that is the degree to which new environmental regionalism is or can be embedded in sustainable development. Further I would suggest that the possible paradox this relationship engenders defines the parameters within which the new environmental regionalism is constructed / bricolée. To express this in relational or dialectical terms, rescaling and functional (or sectoral) differentiation always shape each other – in the enactment of this mutual relationship, the bricoleurs, which includes all of us (Paasi, this volume), contribute to geo-socio-political transformation, radical or not.

Second, the roles of collective identity and institutional arrangements in environmental regionalism raise the question of time in the rescaling of environmental or other practice. To borrow an analytic distinction from Lieberherr (this volume), who examined the influence of rescaling on effectiveness, efficiency, and legitimacy, I would suggest, also in an effort to re-emphasize the historically contingent nature of all forms of polity and polity transformation, that the implications of the relationship between boundary making and sectoral differentiation manifest at different time scales. Hence, whereas the move to a different scale of environmental action may produce relatively immediate effects in terms of efficiency (economies of scale!), perhaps medium term effects in terms of effectiveness (mitigation of some externalities), the effects in terms of legitimacy take longer to become evident, precisely because they are in part determined by whether or not a new spatial field of practice is efficient and/or effective in addressing the goals it set out to meet; this, in effect, is a second dialectical dynamic I would like to stress. Hence, the potentially positive role of collective identity and institutional arrangements may not become immediately apparent, which should caution us in our assessments of legitimacy or accountability deficits in new environmental regionalism.

In conclusion, even though numerous examples of cross-border environmental regionalism have been under way for some time, especially in Europe, little scholarly work has addressed its implications for progress towards sustainable development in the sense of an integration of environmental, economic, and social challenges and opportunities (in other words, policy integration). This lacuna is of importance to the prospects for environmental regionalism. As more and more mechanisms for cross-border cooperation are put in place (one recent example is the European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation, EGTC), practitioners gain first-hand insights into the relationship between boundary formation and policy integration, as well as the synergies and conflicts between new and existing institutions and identities. Where environmental concerns play a central role, and especially where the institutionalization of ecoregional spaces is a stated goal, key pieces of the puzzle of sustainable development are bound to be found.

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