Does Regionalism Challenge Globalization or Build Upon It?

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As the world witnesses the globe shrinking with the advancement of technology and the increasing interdependence states have upon one another, it is hard not to detect the numerous weaknesses and unaddressed atrocities that lay within the system of 'globalized' international relations. This paper will aim to explain that in response to the many faults the system of 'globalization' contains, a new form of regionalism has arisen in the world to address what global multilateralism can not. Before even expanding on such a topic, the modern term 'globalization' and its post-World War II origins must be defined and looked at to see why such a liberal-based system was flawed from its 'birth.' Then, 'regionalism' will briefly be defined in context so as to give an idea of the contrasting ideals each term embodies. Later, through the use of pragmatic examples such as continental governing bodies, regional trade agreements, and cultural movements, it will be proven that as a result of globalization, regionalism is rising in political, economic, and cultural spheres. To offer perspective, a counterargument will be made surrounding how regionalism might be taking a step backward in achieving global cohesiveness. However, it will be concluded that regionalism is in fact a building block of achieving a successful 'globalized world' and thus, must be embraced rather than avoided.

When speaking of 'globalization,' it is rare two people will mean the same thing as there exists a consistent disagreement regarding its sources, consequences, and whether the term even exists.[1] The 'globalization' that will be discussed is the version that had arisen following the Second World War as a result of the American world order imposed by the United States. The creation of the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and the United Nations all represented the vision of a someday borderless world or rather a 'globalized' world.[2] Today, globalization implies the consistent growth of a world market, allows the increasing penetration of national economies, and essentially intensively 'transnationalizes' economic, financial, environmental, and political problems whether a state likes it or not.[3]

Political scientist Toshiro Tanaka criticizes that the basic problem of globalization is its selectiveness. "Exclusion is inherent in the process [of globalization], and the benefits are evenly balanced by misery, conflict, and violence."[4] When it comes to the sources of globalization, they are detected in the capitalist mode of production, technological development, and/or the deregulation of financial markets.[5] To summarize, the United States in the post-war era catalyzed the version of globalization which countries recognize today as a weakly-regulated world system that favors the few and tortures the majority with transnational problems.

Regionalism, like globalization, can also be seen as somewhat vague in its meaning. First off, a region is defined not just as a geographical unit but also a social system, organized cooperation in a certain field (security, economy, cultural), and/or an acting subject with a distinct identity. It should be explained that there is a sharp contrast between "old regionalism" which existed during the Cold War period and "new regionalism" which is seen arising in modern day.[6] Old regionalism revolved around countries siding with hegemonic powers, implementing protectionist policies, acting inward oriented and specific intentions, and holding the structural realist approach of concerning itself with the actions of states.[7] NATO and the Warsaw Pact are both excellent examples of old regionalism as they were forced regional agreements as a result of the bipolar system their creators resided in.

New regionalism on the other hand, has taken shape out of the multi-polar world order and is a more spontaneous process from within the regions, where constituent states now experience the need for cooperation in order to tackle new global challenges.[8] New regionalism is a more comprehensive and multidimensional process which not only includes trade and economic development but also environmental, social, and security issues. Not to mention, it forms part of a structural transformation in which non-state actors are also active and operating at several levels of the global system. Modern regionalism goes far beyond free trade and addresses multiple concerns as the world struggles to adapt the transforming and globalizing world.[9]

In the economic sphere, regionalism has proven to be extremely effective in helping to secure markets and providing economic strength through the creation of Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs). In globalizing institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization, agreements binding governments to liberalization of markets restrict their ability to pursue macroeconomic policies.[10] However, under RTAs, economic policies remain more stable and consistent since they cannot be violated by a participant country with provoking some kind of sanctions from other members.[11] An excellent example of this is the North American Free Trade Agreement's (NAFTA) stabilization and increase of Mexico's political and economic policies.[12]

In the globalizing market system, huge amounts of capital can be disinvested and reinvested in a relatively short amount of time. Thus, states lose control over exchanges and economic development and as a result holds a reduced its role in its own economy. Regional Trade Agreements help nations gradually work towards global free trade through allowing countries to increase the level of competition slowly and give domestic industries time to adjust.[13] The increasing membership of less economically developed countries within the European Union, Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) is testament to the economic stability offered by regional economic organizations.[14] ASEAN countries have already begun vying for RTAs with China in hopes of rebuilding economic stability and renewing growth that was shaken by the economic crisis of 1997.[15] In the end, entering regional pacts with hegemonic powers can be easily seen to be more beneficial for smaller countries than subjecting themselves to the hegemonic-controlled free market.

A major weakness globalization embodies, is its inability to effectively address transnational security and political issues.[16] As previously stated, globalization is selective and while some gain profit from the implementation of neo-liberalist principles, others are found to suffer at their hands. Hence regional organizations have been created to address more local problems and to prevent foreign intervention.[17] For example, Organization of African Unity was formed to prevent external manipulation which globalization so freely allows and reacted to eleven conflicts on the continent. Not to mention the fact that the African Union was formed out of the necessity to address what multilateral, globalizing efforts could not after the Rwandan Genocide and the crisis in Somalia. The African Union's regional success is testified by the reduced number of interstate wars and its quick response to peace negotiations concerning the genocide in Darfur, Sudan.[18]

Besides security, globalization has failed in ensuring that multilateral political legislation be implemented throughout the world. For example, the Kyoto Protocol as well as the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen implemented very few binding regulations in a world where globalization has made pollution transnational. The failure for a state to have control over its citizens' health holds a dangerous effect for its legitimacy as government and thus must effectively collaborate with other actors in the world to ensure that safety. This is seen in the European Union's carbon trade market where, despite failures seen at the Copenhagen Conference and the Kyoto Protocol, pollution regulations have been put in place. The fact that these regional management programs exist and persist, in spite of rivalries, shows the seen imperative need by states for cooperation.[19]

As a result of this high rise in globalization, states have lost control over the external relations of their societies when they are exposed to mutual cultural influences. Political Scientist Niels Lange argues that cultural influences now appear in a co-modified way. 'Patterns of consumption are converging throughout the world, languages become "anglicized," and the youth consumes similar styles of music and pop culture.'[20] This spread of 'imagined communities' where standardization exists through language, education, and even values has faced opposition due to the culturally diminishing effect it has. Both interstate and sub-state regionalism has occurred in response to the spread of such 'cultural globalization' in order to preserve distinct cultural attributes.

Regionalism has responded to cultural globalization through an increase in cultural identity and the rise of regionalist parties. A perfect example is the rise of Parti Quebecois Bloc and the general cultural identity the region of Quebec holds. Being the sole French speaking region in all of mainland North America, Quebec has retained a stronghold on ensuring its Francophone tradition does not end. It remains the leader in the entire Western Hemisphere for culturally-related imports since it belongs to a country with a strong anglicized tradition and increasingly 'globalized' community.[21] On a much larger scale, it can be observed that cultural regionalization is occurring in European-based North America, Europe, Northeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America. Hence it can be observed that cultural regionalism has resulted from a resistance to a global identity.

With the increasing sense of regionalism growing in the world to essentially make up for the weaknesses modern globalization has failed to address, the question remains if the world is moving away from global unity. Tanaka states that new regionalism should be defined as a world order concept. 'Since one regionalization of the world holds repercussions over other regions of the world, it is thus shaping the way in which new world order is being organized.'[22] Not to mention, that regionalism centers on the creation of regional identity as opposed to a more global identity. After all, one of the main focuses of the European Union at the moment is its focus in creating a European identity. Thus it could be argued that 'Huntington's clash of civilizations' hypothesis could be plausible under these conditions of region versus region. In the end, regionalism can be seen as simply building up states and conflict up on a larger scale.[23]

However, the build up of regionalism is made only possible by the sheer width of the world that globalization encompasses and thus could not replace the system in which it exists. With multiple multilateral institutions holding regulations over regional bodies, it is very hard for globalization and international multilateral systems to be overturned. In addition, with the rise of interregionalism, or the pursuit of formalized intergovernmental relations with respect to relationships across distinct regions, the world is able to act cohesively on a larger scale. For example, the European Union has initiate formal interregional talks with East Asia countries, developed interregional accord with MERCOSUR, and has held Asia-Europe Meetings (ASEM). Henceforth, with the political and economic stability offered to countries by regionalism, future interregional relations can be presumed to be peaceful.[24]

In the face of weakly tamed globalizing world, it has been argued that states have responded through regionalizing in order to preserve economic, political, and cultural stability. It should be concluded that regionalist blocs have resulted mostly out of the current system's inability to address *ad hoc* situations occurring in various fields throughout the world; not to mention, they have also resulted from the unpredictable future the globalizing world offers with its varying economics, political motivations, and cultural migrations. Although it could be argued that regionalism is simply placing the international system on a larger scale, the amount of stability and regulation that comes with regionalism is incomparable. Therefore, it has been properly argued that regionalism is in fact a building bloc of achieving global peace and cohesiveness through its more specified and regulative approach.

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