

# *Theory Talks*

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## THEORY TALK #19

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### FREDERIK SÖDERBAUM ON THE WANING STATE, CONCEPTUALIZING THE REGION AND EUROPE AS A GLOBAL ACTOR

#### Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion on actual International Relations-related topics for both students and specialists. Theory Talks frequently invites cutting-edge specialists in the field to open a debate, discuss current issues or elucidate a theory.

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# FREDERIK SÖDERBAUM ON THE WANING STATE, CONCEPTUALIZING THE REGION AND EUROPE AS A GLOBAL ACTOR



Frederik Söderbaum is one of the principal protagonists of the New Regionalism Approach (NRA) and has done innovative research on ‘regional theory’, Europe as a global actor and regional processes in Africa. In this *Talk*, he explains, amongst others, how one can conceptualize the region in different ways, which normative and empirical implications this has, and applies this to Europe and Africa.

**What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current International Relations (IR)? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?**

For me personally the biggest **challenge** is to better grasp how poverty and conflict can be reduced. This is obviously not the principal **debate** in current IR, which illustrates that some of the main debates in IR are not always the most important ones.

My general position is that because it is a *global* challenge we need to ‘think global’ and ultimately employ some sort of a ‘global social theory’ rather than IR theory as it is generally conceived to strictly concern the relationship between states. That is, in order to address the challenges of poverty and conflict, one has to shift the focus from state-interests to human interests.

So far I have devoted most of my attention to, firstly, exploring the usefulness of critical (and constructivist) theoretical approaches, and, secondly, exploring the role of regionalism (formal regional integration projects) and regionalization (*de facto* economic, social, cultural and political processes on a regional scale) — in different regions, by different state and non-state actors, and on various regional scales. From my point of view, regionalism and regionalization have the potential to solve many of the problems inherent in the ‘Westfailure’ system.

**How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?**

Being a Believer in Jesus defines who I am, where I am going, and to quite a significant extent it also guides what I do as an academic. For instance, my faith explains why my main focus is placed on human suffering and on Africa, because that is where suffering is deepest but at the same time possible to rectify through more appropriate governance and politics.

Apart from that, Björn Hettne is without doubt my greatest source of inspiration. In the mid-1990s I did a master thesis on regionalism in Southern Africa, which was a frustrating exercise because at the time there were no theories available that could explain and conceptualize the dynamics that I detected. When I came across Hettne's writings on regionalism I realized that the most intelligible thing to do was to try work with him as close as possible. That must have been the best decision of my academic career.

Hettne is like a classical thinker, who thinks in terms of an integrated social science and who is able to walk in and out of various disciplines and debates. His mind has shaped much of my home department — the School of Global Studies at University of Gothenburg — which explains why it has been such an inspiring and probably unique research milieu.

### **What would a student need to become a specialist in IR?**

I think there are many different routes, and as a result I prefer a general answer. It seems to me that the most important disposition is to be very curious, perhaps even a little bit 'obsessed' with how the world hangs together. It also appears that many specialists are willing to work quite hard (sometimes too hard?) in order to try to understand/explain whatever puzzle they come up with.

On a slightly less general level, I think it is difficult to understand the world in a global way without a certain degree of theoretical interest, which of course has to be tried against empirical processes and history. In my view it is also useful to be familiar with several disciplines beyond IR and preferably also have an interest and knowledge of more than one part of the world, especially if you do a PhD focusing on Europe or the West.

### **How did the New Regionalism Approach come about and what are its main differences with older or other approaches to the region?**

The first thoughts were developed by Björn Hettne in the mid-1980s, within a research project on 'European integration beyond the Cold War'. The New Regionalism Approach (NRA) itself was first mentioned in the mid-1990s during another of Hettne's research projects: the UNU-WIDER research project on The New Regionalism.

The NRA emerged as an eclectic and explorative effort to understand the regional phenomenon in the context of economic globalization. During the 1990s its main focus was on systemic factors (especially globalization and end of the Cold War) rather than the intra-regional factors and interdependencies that characterized many of the so-called old approaches, especially the neofunctionalism approach by Ernst Haas and others. Hand in hand with a deeper concern with regional agency, the construction of regions and 'regionness', the similarities and influences of 'older' as well as more recent constructivist approaches have become more evident. Still, the NRA differs from most approaches in IR in that state-led *regional organizations* are seen as a second order phenomenon compared to the processes of *regionalization*, and by whom, for whom and for what purpose regions are made and unmade. This means, among other things, that regions are

not taken for granted, or conceived as pre-defined spaces, which tends to be the case when the main attention is given to regional organizations or regionalism as 'policy and project'.

### **Does the NRA have normative content?**

Most theories and approaches have a normative content. As Robert Cox so eloquently stated: 'Theory is always for someone and for some purpose'. Building on critical IPE, the NRA seeks to uncover existing power structures and imbalances in order to identify alternative avenues for social and structural change. The early versions of the NRA tried in particular — with Karl Polanyi as a major source of inspiration — to explore the role of regionalism as a political response to economic globalization. The NRA's increased emphasis in the 2000s on agency and region-building probably makes it a little bit less normative than the earlier version from the 1990s. I think it is possible to combine the overall NRA perspective with different more substantive theories and therefore also different normative positions.

### **Why the region?**

From an analytical perspective the region is systematically excluded in much of IR thinking due to the overemphasis on two spatial levels, the global-system level and the state level, which has had negative effect on the study of regions and regionalism. The English professor Barry Buzan made a great contribution to the field when he argued for increased attention to the regional level. But it is not simply a matter of bringing in the regional 'level', and I think that IR has a lot to learn from sociology and geography in order to better understand space and spatial categories. I myself am influenced by the way geographers challenge space-as-container schemas and adopt more nuanced multi-scalar perspectives.

From a more practical point of view, the importance of the region is associated with the (potential) strength of regional governance and regional solutions. Hettne has powerfully formulated it as that the regional is just 'right', because the nation-state solution is 'obsolete' and the global is 'premature'. Although this is of course not always true, regional governance is here to stay, constituting one crucial mode of governance in the context of globalization.

### **Are there differences between the meanings of the terms regionalism, regionness, and regionalization?**

There was certainly some conceptual confusion in the field in the 1990s. There is growing agreement that regionalism refers to the cognitive ideas and policy that are aimed at enhancing cooperation, integration or coordination within a regional space. It is usually associated with a regional programme, and often leads to institution-building. Regionalization refers to the process of cooperation and integration creating a regional space, and to the 'outcome'. At its most basic it means a concentration of activity on the regional level, which may give rise to the formation of regions, regional networks and actors, or regional organizations. Regionalism and regionalization

are not always related, but often they impact on one another. Regionalism may thus precede as well as follow from regionalization, and in my view IR scholarship has devoted too little attention to exploring this relationship.

The concept of regionness was coined by Björn Hettne in the early 1990s, and I have been actively part in its gradual reformulation. Hettne was mainly inspired by the concept of stateness, but also by the literature on imagined communities. The concept seeks to conceptualize the process whereby regions are 'becoming'. It can be seen as a comparative and mainly heuristic analytical tool for understanding the construction and consolidation of regions and the formation of relevant actors in a historical and multidimensional perspective. There are a few different versions, but the most recent ranges from seeing the region as social system, regional complex, international society, regional community to regional institutionalized polity. To some extent the five levels express a certain evolutionary logic, but there is, in our view, nothing deterministic with the rise of regionness. The concept was not used very often in the 1990s, and sometimes it also received some tough criticism. Since then, in particular younger scholars of a constructivist disposition have begun to employ it and also develop it theoretically.

**The region, in most discourses, is all about integration of governance. We've moved from city-states to nation-states and now to the region. Is the region a step towards deeper integration (a 'world state') or is it the last stop in the integration-ride?**

Regionalism may lead to deeper integration, both within and between regions. Its essential feature on the global level is not fragmentation, even if regional integration is likely to lead to disintegration somewhere else in the system or on a different level, which we see very clearly, for instance, in Europe and Africa. Integration and disintegration therefore go hand in hand.

In my view a world state is neither possible nor preferred, since it will most likely be hierarchical and unstable. I think a world order based on regions rather than nation-states would represent a more stable and less hierarchical world order. The regions are better equipped to deal with regional characteristics, cultures and interests, and it would facilitate a better multilateralism: a regional multilateralism. This is not to say that there is not at the same time a potential for some very strong and functioning global governance structures and regimes.

**Is the NRA-focus on integration as a 'policy and project', as argues Peter Katzenstein in Theory Talk #15, a Euro-centric bias?**

As indicated above I certainly agree that the emphasis on regionalism as 'policy and project' is a Euro-centric bias, which prevents a better understanding of the regional phenomenon in Europe as well as in the rest of the world. Although I think that this bias is increasingly recognized as a weakness, it continues to plague much of the debate. The NRA itself has been defined in order to try to avoid this bias by going beyond formal regionalism to also focus on informal regionalism as well as processes of regionalization. In fact, Katzenstein's work on regionalism in Asia has been

one source of inspiration, and it appears to me that he refers to the broader IR literature rather than the NRA more specifically.

**Can you explain if European integration has a problem or if things are going as planned?**

Obviously the EU does not go as planned, for instance in the case of the Constitution. Enlargement must not be a finished process, and it is only natural to have a lively discussion about where the EU ends and why. Here I think that the idea of Europe is more important than territorial boundaries. Challenges and so-called 'problems' will always occur and they are fruitful, at least as long as they are discussed and dealt with. If there are no 'problems' it probably signifies that the EU has become irrelevant or undemocratic.

I doubt however that the EU will become irrelevant, because it is part and parcel of European politics. But it is an open question exactly where it is going. To me the EU is a project, which will always be in the making, constantly being revised and open to different social forces and interests. In Sweden the debate has finally started to mature a little bit. The question is no longer whether to say yes or no to membership, but rather to revise and influence the project and process. Noone asks whether we should say yes or no to the 'Swedish nation-state project'. It is equally pointless to define the debate, as many have done in Sweden, in terms of whether to say yes or no to the EU. In my view this is not to disqualify criticism, only that if there was no EU it would have been invented.

**You've written a book about Europe as a global actor, which it most certainly is. What are the limits to European agency?**

The EU's role as a global actor is intimately tied to the EU's internal integration process and its own identity. Lower levels of cohesion, regionness and a shared identity within Europe have a negative effect on European agency. One problem with European agency is that many states and other actors lack a European perspective on regional and global problems, and mainly ask what the EU can do for them. Hence, the limits to European agency lies in the failure to think and act together. The point is certainly not to abandon national objectives or interests, but there is a need for a post-Westphalian and cosmopolitan attitude towards other EU members as well as towards the rest of the world. The EU can only function properly when it is based on the values of the EU project. This is similar to the official discourse of the EU's foreign policy, but the point is that sometimes the EU acts according to realistic, short-term and self-centred interests (what Hettne and I defined as a 'soft imperialist'), which undermines long-term European agency.

**There are quite a few (American?) scholars who argue that the EU needs a proper army in order to be a real global actor – in politics, in order to enforce policy, the ultimate argument is force. Or not?**

A 'proper' army in order to enforce policy would go against the very meaning of the EU. It would undermine the EU as a global actor, not the least its internal cohesion and identity. The

EU may of course build a stronger capacity for military and civilian peace operations, but this will hopefully not be in order to enforce policy, at least not in the 'hard' way.

**Is Africa integrating? And if so, why should it? African states seem to have enough domestic problems to overcome...**

Africa is integrating in many ways, but only rarely in terms of formal political regional integration. There is very little transfer of sovereignty to regional institutions in the developing world, which results in that integrationists and some neofunctionalists claim that it is not the 'real thing'. But this is to miss the point in at least two ways: it favours Euro-centrism, and it favours a particular reading of European integration at the expense of other perspectives whereby Europe is more like other regions. During the last few years a dynamic and very interesting dialogue on these matters has occurred between EU studies and IR regionalists.

It is a rather common belief that state-led regionalism/regional integration in Africa is weak or failed. But such conclusion is heavily dependent on what theoretical perspective and assessment criteria that are being used. I am part of a rather small but happy group of 'new regionalism' scholars whose research shows that political regimes and state representatives in Africa are quite deeply involved in various kinds of regionalism and regionalization, such as regime-boosting regionalism, symbolic regionalism, or even shadow regionalism as a façade for more informal patterns of trans-state regionalization. I have for instance turned the 'failure'-argument on its head, and showed that we may also talk about 'the success of regionalism in Africa', but where 'success' is defined from the perspective of the political regimes and their rather myopic interests.

Still, I am fully convinced about the fact that state-led regionalism in Africa can be very beneficial also for the larger population, but then current state-led practices need to be transformed. At least two things are needed for this to materialize: firstly, top-down and state-led regionalism needs to be adjusted to the needs and dynamism of bottom-up and non-state regionalization in Africa (e.g. informal economies, ethnic business networks, small and domestic business, civil societies), and secondly, that African leaders adopt a more cooperative agency instead of assessing regionalism on a case-by-case basis. Needless to say, the latter aspect is closely associated with the nature of the political regimes, and many autocrats and political regimes in Africa tend to be more concerned with private goods rather than public goods.

Rergarding your second question, it is a common misunderstanding that countries need to deal with domestic problems before moving to regional cooperation and so called regional 'problems'. Regionalism is a strategy to deal also with national weakness and domestic problems. Hence, weak and small countries may actually benefit even more than stronger and larger countries from regional cooperation. In addition, globalization implies that fewer and fewer 'problems' are in fact domestic or confined to the nation-state, resulting in that they have to be solved or managed through international and regional cooperation and governance.

**Last question. You're a European IR scholar. Is there a difference between the European and the American approach to IR?**

Yes, as Wendt, Nye, Katzenstein and others describe much better than me in their *Theory Talks*, I think there is a general difference, among other things consisting of a 'softer', more eclectic and open-ended European approach in contradistinction to a more rationalist and rigid, parsimonious American approach. In my view this discussion illustrates the broader problem of a lack of genuine debate and communication between different standpoints within the field of IR as a whole. From this broader perspective, I see at least three related problems. First, both the American approach and the European approach tend to be rather self-centered and exclusionary, and both fail to include perspectives from the rest of the world. Even if the European approach may be somewhat more inclusive it is clear that IR theory will certainly profit from becoming more 'global'. It seems that one or several Asian approaches are emerging, which is promising. The litmus test for a more relevant and global IR theory is whether this will lead to more genuine communication and debate. Regarding scholarship in and from other regions, there is for instance very little impact of Latin American scholarship in Europe. And African perspectives are marginalized everywhere.

Second, I think both the European and the American approach are needed, so the intellectual issue is not necessarily which one is the most fruitful, rather but to enhance communication and debate between different standpoints.

Third, the European approach (if there is one?) remains fragmented, and there is, at least in certain respects, poor communication between British, French, German traditions and perspectives, as well as inclusion of the smaller Spanish, Italian, Scandinavian and Central/Eastern European traditions.

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### ***Related links***

- [Söderbaum's faculty profile at University of Gothenburg](#)
- [Söderbaum's Official homepage UNU-CRIS](#)



- Read Söderbaum, Hettne, and Stalgren's *The EU as a Global Actor in the South* (2008) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Söderbaum's *Regionalisation and Civil Society: The Case of Southern Africa* (2007) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Söderbaum's *Modes of Regional Governance in Africa: Neoliberalism, Sovereignty-boosting and Shadow Networks* (Global Governance, 2004) [here](#) (pdf)