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On: 06 May 2014, At: 23:42

Publisher: Routledge

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New Political Economy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cnpe20>

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Published online: 28 Oct 2013.

To cite this article: R. Guy Emerson (2013): An Art of the Region: Towards a Politics of Regionness, New Political Economy, DOI: [10.1080/13563467.2013.829434](https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2013.829434)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2013.829434>

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An Art of the Region: Towards a Politics of Regionness

R. GUY EMERSON

Recent analysis on New Regionalism has, for Björn Hettne, raised important ontological questions over ‘what we study when we study regionalism’. The paper contributes to this debate by focusing on the shared beliefs, norms and rituals that hold a region together. Working between the New Regionalism literature and thinking on international regimes, this paper – to paraphrase Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie – outlines the ‘inescapable inter-subjective quality’ of a region. This focus on inter-subjectivity seeks to improve on existing approaches that consider shared social structures as already fixed, and/or as autonomous constructs operating over and above regional actors. In order to appreciate how inter-subjective structures and regional agents interact with each other, the paper explores the social construction of Latin America. Specifically, it examines the politics of regionness – understood here in relation to identity, space and agents – to demonstrate how various regional actors operate within, and reconstruct, shared meaning. In so doing, it interrogates the practices that govern and continually produce the region.

Keywords: new regionalism, regionness, international regimes, inter-subjectivity, discourse

In 1986, Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie published *International Organization: A State of the Art on an Art of the State*. Analysing the relationship between international governance and State behaviour, they sought to contest the boundaries of existing thought that viewed regimes as already established constraints on the State. In contrast with positions that explain collective behaviour through notions of State egoism – be it via the logics of rational choice or elaborations on the foundations of ‘economic man’ – Kratochwil and Ruggie instead conceived of regimes as social institutions. Moving away from traditional social scientific terms, they emphasised interpretive practices wherein all validity claims were scrutinised by the various regime actors. Regimes, Kratochwil and Ruggie argued, were ultimately constituted by ideas, identities and the

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accumulation of knowledge, rather than by structural factors and/or established institutions. In so doing, they challenged the assumption that the State exclusively faces external incentives and/or constraints on its behaviour, thereby avoiding an appreciation of regimes as either ubiquitous and/or as solely reliant upon a hegemon for their longevity.¹ By no longer understanding regimes as a pre-given framework of rules, norms and procedures, investigation turned to the underlying principles of order and meaning that give rise to international arrangements and, at the same time, their condition for transformation. Regimes, they concluded, had an 'inescapable inter-subjective quality' wherein beliefs, expectations and actor behaviour operated within a shared social setting. Using these insights as a point of departure, just as Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986: 764) argue that the ontology of regimes rests upon a 'strong element of inter-subjectivity', it is suggested below that so too do regions. That is, regions are also constituted through social practices and therefore cannot be reduced to instrumental terms, fashioned exclusively by the pursuit of material interests and/or efficiency concerns.

This paper, then, is situated within the 'ontological problem' raised by Hettne (2005: 543) over the debate on 'what we study when we study regionalism'. Focusing on the inter-subjective underpinning of a region, the analysis below begins with the proposition that interaction within any region is not possible without an overlap of interests and identities. That is, a region is predicated on that which is held in common; a commonality that evolves in the process of interaction and engagement with the inter-subjective realm. Far from a series of already given interests and identities, however, to interact, operate, observe or even describe the region is also to participate in its construction (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000: 460). The region, then, does not involve fixed notions of the State or institutional beliefs, but is socially constructed and therefore politically contested. The multiple discourses of regionalism, regional identity and the process of region building itself, are constantly being re-defined, with its boundaries and identifying structures the products of continual struggle and therefore reappraisal. In order to appreciate the multifaceted, multilayered process(es) of regional integration, it is suggested here and explored more fully as the paper progresses, that an ontology of inter-subjectivity is best placed to acknowledge the intricacies of 'regionness' (Söderbaum 2003: 1–2; Hettne 2005: 543).

The paper is broken into two parts. The first outlines what a study of inter-subjectivity looks like. Analytically, it focuses on the intersection between constructivist thinking over regimes and regions, and how New Regionalism significantly contributes to this field. The second part builds on these findings to explore the construction of regionness in relation to Latin America; a region whose definition is currently under significant contestation. It illustrates how various regional actors operate in relation to shared meaning, which, in turn, not only shapes their respective interests and identities, but also refashions the inter-subjective realm itself.

Part one: understanding regions

Just as Kratochwil and Ruggie proposed that the validity claims of regimes should be scrutinised, so too should the policy positions, statements and actions within a

regional setting. Such a fluid appreciation of a regionness – in terms of the social construction of a region, including the various actors and forms of behaviour that are legitimated within its boundaries – requires moving beyond a rational state-as-actor focus and its concern with the costs/benefits of membership or the automatic convergence of member behaviour so as to facilitate agreement making.² In adopting this position, the paper concentrates less on predicting the likely trajectory of an organisation or of its member-states, and therefore avoids explaining actor behaviour in reference to the distribution of power and whether or not a particular State will align itself with another.³

In contrast to assumptions of rational behaviour, the focus here – initially following the work of Wendt (1992) – centres on what he calls the inter-subjective dimensions of State behaviour. At its most fundamental, inter-subjectivity is the basis of community and common meaning. Taylor (1979: 51), for example, describes inter-subjective meaning as giving ‘a common language to talk about social reality and a common understanding of certain norms’. This appreciation is important for Wendt (1994: 384) insofar as he seeks to move beyond exogenously given interests – such as State egoism and/or those derived from the distribution of capabilities internationally – and instead treat State interests and identities as endogenous to interaction. This move, however, is not to dismiss a cost/benefit evaluation, or the importance of material factors in influencing regional thinking. Rather, while ‘[t]he distribution of power may always affect states’ calculations’, Wendt (1992: 397) argues, ‘how it does so depends on the inter-subjective understandings and expectations, on the distribution of knowledge that constitutes their conceptions of self and other.’ Put more succinctly in relation to regions by Acharya (2007: 630), power matters, however, local responses to power may matter even more in the construction of regional orders. Cooperation is no longer reducible to rational-behavioural conceptions of process and institution, but becomes cognitive insofar as interaction is understood via the socialisation of actors and the construction of common interests and identities (Wendt 1992: 399).⁴

Placing these insights in accordance with thinking on the region, Adler and Barnett (1996: 79) argue that inter-subjective knowledge fashions both an understanding of the region and its respective member-states. It acts as a normative structure, they suggest, whereby membership – including certain rights and obligations – all depend on the ability of member-states to abide by the region’s shared knowledge and beliefs. In order to be part of a region, so this argument goes, member-states must draw upon its normative conditions and thus reaffirm a common worldview. Rather than a fixed process that promotes the transferral of interests onto member-states, however, institutions instead anchor and promote processes of socialisation through which definitions of interests and identities shift. Similar in this sense are claims by Krasner (1989: 70) that the ‘preferences, capabilities, and basic self identities of individuals [or States] are conditioned by these institutional structures’. Placing a further emphasis on these structures, Reus-Smit (1997: 584) maintains that by grounding inter-subjective beliefs in institutional practices – in particular its constitutional structures – then the behaviour of member-states is again drawn together so as to affect a common worldview.

New Regionalism adopts a similar approach to the study of regions. Moving beyond previous neo-functionalist understandings of cooperation, new

regionalism takes a pluralistic approach wherein regional agents are no longer confined to state actors but can include local groups and individuals, as well as transnational actors, all of whom operate at different societal levels. Developed by Hettne and Söderbaum (2000; Söderbaum 2003; Hettne 2005), New Regionalism moves beyond material incentives to explore how ideational factors such as culture and identity shape the various social, political and institutional aspects of region building. Actor interests, motives, ideas and identities are not exogenously given but are ‘socially constructed by *reflective* actors, capable of adapting to challenges imposed by the actions of others and changing contexts’ (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000: 460 [emphasis in original]). In emphasising this normative realm, New Regionalism moves beyond the mainstream account of regions within International Relations to chart how interests and identities change over time, so as to empower new forms of cooperation and community. To this extent, it focuses less on the region itself as a stagnant object, and more on the social construction of regionness.

Using this brief sketch of the literature as a point of departure, the aim below is to further interrogate notions of regionness by investigating how regionally located knowledge practices constitute both subjects and the regional space itself. This is a position consistent with Wendt’s classification of ‘modern and postmodern constructivist’ views of interests and identities as endogenous to interaction and inter-subjectivity, however, it differs by positing that this inter-subjective knowledge is not already given. The prior relations that give rise to and sustain the region, then, must first be examined – be they the collective identity practices of particular States or the inter-subjective realm itself. The failure to do so is to administer a silence regarding the historicity of the boundaries that the region and its various actors produce, the space it historically clears for itself to operate within, and the subjects that it historically constitutes (Ashley 1987: 419). Accordingly, attention now turns to the construction of inter-subjective meaning within a region so as to contribute to the study of regionness.

From the ontological priority of the State to an ontology of inter-subjectivity

In developing an ontology of inter-subjectivity, the aim here is to demonstrate how shared knowledge and ideational forces are themselves constructed and modified. While Wendt’s approach undoubtedly moves us in this direction, so too does it fail to fully capture the contingent and therefore precarious nature of inter-subjectivity. Regionness is contingent in the sense that the inter-subjective realm – from which common worldviews and practices are developed – can be read and operationalised in different and potentially contradictory ways by member-states; and it is precarious in that such potential for reappraisal can recast the inter-subjective realm and thus the normative coherence of the region itself. It is this contingent/precarious nature that is now explored.

The constructivism of Wendt – as well as Adler and Barnett – is unable to appreciate the fragility inherent to shared meaning, and therefore regionness itself, largely because of the ontological priority given to the State. This limit is best illustrated by both Ruggie and Kratochwil separately, who criticise the

methodological individualism apparent in Wendt's work and how it restricts an understanding of common ideas to 'beliefs held by individuals'.⁵ This is not to argue – following Ruggie (1998: 869) – that only individuals hold ideas or beliefs. Rather, what is criticised is the reverse proposition: that all beliefs are individual beliefs or are reducible to individual beliefs. This neglect of common knowledge and how it is constructed is apparent in Wendt's (1992: 417) claims that the process of creating institutions is 'one of internalizing new understandings of self and other, of acquiring new role identities'. While in *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999: 139, 162) Wendt moves beyond this reductionism to acknowledge that 'the effects of collective knowledge are not reducible to individual's beliefs', he continues to underappreciate how the boundaries of collective knowledge mediate State action. For example, he accurately recognises how 'intersubjective systemic structures consist of the shared understandings, expectations, and social knowledge', however, rather than exploring how these social systems are themselves the result of contestation, he upholds that these are merely 'embedded in international institutions' (1994: 389). According to this logic, individual States simply draw on the social system 'out there', without attention paid to how these shared positions themselves came into existence. Inter-subjective structures are thus either reduced to individual beliefs, or alternatively, taken as a given with the logics and the very history of how the structure operates concealed (Derrida 1978: 291).

Similar limitations in appreciating inter-subjective meaning and individual actors are offered by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their analysis of ideology as superstructure. In an investigation that in many ways parallels the above division between inter-subjective ideas 'out there' and State beliefs, Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 108–9) sought to overcome the dichotomy between – in their words – an objective field constituted outside of discourse, and a discourse consisting of the pure expression of thought. In order to overcome this materialist–idealist division, they referred to key Marxist thinkers, particularly Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, who outlined the material character of ideology. Far from a free-floating system of ideas, ideology has a material quality for both thinkers inasmuch as it is embodied in institutions, rituals and so forth. What such analysis was unable to overcome, however, was that this ideological superstructure required an a priori unity with respect to the dispersion of its materiality. That is, it too required that ontological priority was given to – in the case of Gramsci – a unified class, or – for Althusser – the process of reproduction. Superimposing these findings over the analysis of Wendt, the effects of inter-subjective beliefs have a similar ontological presence only insofar as they are attached to fixed actors, be it the State or particular institutional structures.

The argument here, then, drawing on that of Laclau and Mouffe, is that this rigid understanding of the individual and inter-subjective renders some strands of constructivist thinking hamstrung when trying to understand the construction of regionness.⁶ While Wendt – like Gramsci and Althusser – is able to demonstrate how inter-subjective meaning (ideology) is embedded within a State and/or regional institution (a class, or, process of reproduction), he is unable to recognise that this construction is not dependent upon an already given actor. That is, although Wendt acknowledges how State interests and identities change

over time, his appreciation of this change is dependent upon a rigid division between the State and the inter-subjective structure. As demonstrated below, this leaves only two options when seeking to understand the circulation of shared meaning: one, a 'diffusionist' position whereby it is argued that members-states who are subjected to the same environment invariably acquire identical forms; and/or two, that shared meaning is a product of the aggregation of individual beliefs.

First exploring the 'diffusionist' position, common knowledge here involves the transmission of values located beyond the State. Similar to arguments of institutional isomorphism apparent in other constructivist (and neoliberal institutionalist) thinking, shared meaning is diffused by States being subjected to the same environment and therefore becoming more alike (Barnett 2005: 264). It is the 'thickness' of this social environment – following Adler and Barnett (1996: 68, 76) – which 'both describes and explains the emergence of dependable expectations among people who, while organized around states, nevertheless share the same transnational environment.' The second, 'aggregationist' position maintains that common knowledge is the aggregate of the ideas that individual States hold. Clearly committed to methodological individualism, shared meaning here depends on whether (or not) an individual State adopts interests similar to those apparent in its immediate normative environment. Put simply, it is by adopting collective interests that individual States can reproduce shared meaning, with common knowledge thus explained by aggregating individually held beliefs (Wendt 1994: 386, 1999: 160). While the paper does not oppose this position, it does suggest that this convergence need not rely on a fixed, a priori unity of the state-as-actor. Rather, this normative convergence (or divergence) can operate at multiple, interwoven levels and involve multiple actors.

Rather than determining the coherence of regionness via diffusion or aggregation, the intention here is to demonstrate how agents play an active role in inscribing the region. Far from a passive process of diffusion, for example, any normative structure is dependent on the active engagement of its various actors. States subjected to the same normative environment will not necessarily adopt similar identities and interests, but draw upon these inter-subjectively shared norms in multiple ways. Indeed, contra the aggregationist view, while social structures may penetrate individual agents, this inter-subjective meaning can be interpreted and operationalised in different (and potentially contradictory) ways by multiple actors. In taking this perspective, the focus thus shifts from an assumed harmony – via diffusion or aggregation – to a process in which certain beliefs and expectations come to be shared (or resisted). As a result, it also moves beyond methodological individualism and towards a counter-balancing holism wherein the construction of regionness cannot be simply deduced from its constituent parts; that the whole context of regionness is more than the sum of its parts (Dreyfus *et al.* 1983: 55).

An ontology of inter-subjectivity

It is possible to move towards such an appreciation by returning to the analysis of Laclau and Mouffe. Rather than an assumed unity necessary for ideology or

inter-subjective beliefs to materialise, any claim to unity – be it within the State or the region – should be understood to result from a process of contestation and constructed equivalences that cannot be assumed a priori (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 142). Following Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986: 774), then, any exploration of inter-subjectivity cannot begin from a positivist division between an already given subject and object, but requires an interpretivist approach that is able to interrogate the rules which govern the various social practices that produce subjects and objects. Viewing the construction of regionness as a discursive practice offers such an approach.

This method, however, is not to reduce the region to a linguistic competition between groups of signs or symbols. Rather, it suggests that regionness has no basis outside or prior to its articulation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 109). This raises important new dimensions to the investigation of regions; notably questions over the construction of identity, space and agency. In contrast to talk of already given actors, the various identities, interests and the very region itself are better understood as being involved in an ongoing process of becoming (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000: 462). Identity is here conceived as provisionally and often precariously constituted at the intersection of various discourses, resulting in multiple possible constructions. Similar to New Regionalism, this study of regionness is constantly confronted with shifting identities and flexible loyalties (Bøås *et al.* 2003: 208).

With this contingency in mind, it is best to conceive of official readings of the region as practices of subjectification – rather than subjugations – that attempt to ‘bring into being’ a particular region. This identity, however, can be reworked and subverted. Given the uncertainty associated with identity practices, various policy statements and initiatives emanating from the region can be read as attempts to continually re-constitute its particular reading of regionness. Explored below in relation to Latin America, the interest here shifts to examining the politics of regionness, or put alternatively, the politics of defining the region, wherein official practices of subjectification compete with other readings. ‘Latin America’ in this sense does not refer to an essential characteristic inherent to the peoples inhabiting South America, Central America and the Caribbean, but instead is conceived as a process of construction that reflects particular modes of thought (Moreiras 1994: 223). The production of regionness is thus investigated through how the various actors shape the boundaries of the region, including what forms of behaviour are seen as acceptable and which practices of identity are reinforced or dismissed as abject.

More than simply a geographical or administrative object, the region is a fluid subject in the making (or un-making) in which its boundaries are shifting, and so too are its capacities as an actor. This raises specific questions over how regionness is produced/reproduced as part of the broader social production of space. While the dynamics of space is explored in greater detail in the section to follow, the point to acknowledge here is how these new understandings of a regional space erode a state-based logic and point to a more flexible understanding of spatiality. A regional space here acquires a figurative value that not only constitutes an imagined community, but affects what Lefèbvre (1991) calls a space of representation whereby regions are continuously constituted (and potentially

undone) by the daily social relations, material conditions and discursive forms that are lived through. A Latin American space, for example, is developed contextually in relation to ethnicity, class, language, religion, and so on, and as a result becomes a constitutive element in the politics of identity. Viewed in a historical perspective, a narrative of *Hispanism* previously united Latin America under the banner of the Romance languages, Catholicism, traditional gender roles and the subordination of racial minorities to a nation-state managed by the Creole elite (McPherson 2008: 17). These practices, however, were predicated on solidifying the Rio Grande border separating North America from their Latin neighbours, and was thus placed in opposition to, and credited with the rejection of US values and Anglo-Saxon ways in the early twentieth century. The social construction of the regional space, then, is not the product of autonomous processes that exist independent of actors, but is located within a particular set of overlapping social relations which find their expression within a perpetual struggle over meaning (Paasi 2002: 805–6). A study of regionness is thus also a study of how a regional space is configured.

Moreover, central to the study of regionness is a more nuanced relationship between regional agents and inter-subjectivity. Rather than a separate realm ‘out there’, various regional actors operate within and play an active role in reconstructing the inter-subjective space from which an understanding of regionness is elaborated. This agency-orientated perspective – following Acharya (2007: 630) – acknowledges how local actors play an active role in the construction of regions, as they both resist and are socialised within its structures. Here, the inter-subjective realm becomes open and theorised through an appreciation of structuration: a focus on how various actors – be they State or non-state based – interact with (and simultaneously rework) social meaning. However, rather than a structuration model that posits already fixed agents in a dialectic relationship with one another, the claim here is that this engagement mutually constitutes both the actors involved and the inter-subjective realm itself. To this extent, inter-subjectivity occupies an ontological space between the formal configuration of a region and the various social practices constituted by its multiple practitioners. Moreover, as demonstrated below in relation to the construction of Latin American regionness, so too is this ontology of inter-subjectivity the basis from which any reading of regionness is first made possible.

Part two: the politics of regionness

Taking a concrete example so as to tease out the importance of inter-subjective meaning, the interest below focuses on the production of ‘Latin Americanness’, conceived as the inter-subjectively held identities, forms of behaviour and conceptions of space within the region. Over the past 200 years, an understanding of Latin Americanness has oscillated between two visions famously outlined by James Monroe and Simón Bolívar. It is important to note at the outset, however, that the term Latin America would only come into common usage in the latter half of the nineteenth century as a result of attempts by the Empire of Napoleon III to include France among countries with influence in the Americas. Beforehand, the contestation of regional space centred on rival claims to

Pan-Americanism. One such claim involved the exploits of Simón Bolívar and his attempts to unify the former Spanish colonies at the expense of the USA. While historically this posture would take multiple forms, its present-day incarnation is best reflected in an organisation that takes the Liberator's name: the *Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America – People's Trade Treaty (ALBA-TCP)*. Although the Alliance is explored in greater detail below, for the purposes here it can be seen to contrast with a US-authored vision born in the Monroe Doctrine that advocates an Americas free from the influence of countries outside the Western Hemisphere. This is a reading that places the USA as the guardian of the hemisphere, capable of acting coercively, sometimes benevolently, but always knowing best.⁷

Far from revealing an objective criterion for defining the region, this dichotomy provides an insight into the social construction of Latin Americanness (Söderbaum 2003: 7). A Bolivarian reading, for example, not only forwards a more radical interpretation of the region, but, as demonstrated, it also serves to legitimate actor behaviour that contrasts with the interests of Washington and reinforces identity practices that exclude the USA. This investigation of Latin Americanness is thus consistent with the region-building approach of Neumann (2003) that explores how regional agents not only attempt to impose their own definition of the region, but also to fend off rival projects. Following Neumann, the aim is to explore this politics of regionness, explicitly asking whose region is being constructed and how.

It is possible to outline the radical trajectory of Latin Americanness – as the inter-subjectively held identities, forms of behaviour and conceptions of space in the region – by returning to ALBA-TCP, specifically the middle part of its name: the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of *Our America* – People's Trade Treaty.⁸ Operating under the banner of 'Our America', ALBA-TCP fosters a singular Latin American community by promoting its particularity vis-a-vis the USA. At its most fundamental, Our America spatially incarcerates a Latin American Self and attempts to reappropriate the notion of 'America'. Articulated by Venezuela – the founding member of the Alliance, alongside Cuba – its then president, Chávez (2006: 260), sought to re-contextualise US President James Monroe's famous declaration 'America for Americans' (1823), when he stated:

Men and women of Mar del Plata, and from further afar in Patagonia, you are as much Americans as those from New York, from Washington, from Quebec and those from whichever corner of this continent, we are all Americans... 'America for Americans'.

More than recapturing 'America', however, allusions to Our America enabled Chávez to invoke regionally specific tropes. Most famously articulated by Cuban poet and independence hero José Martí, the very reference to Our America provides a revolutionary aide-mémoire as it draws on a rich, distinctively Latin American series of events, figures and narratives. Contesting the then dominant trains of thought that saw a Latin American future as either assimilation of US practices or increased national insularism, Martí's publication of 'Our America' in

1892 instead promoted regional unity (Lomas 2008: 43). ‘Those who shake their fists, like jealous brothers coveting the same tract of land’, Martí (1977) wrote, ‘... should clasp hands and become one ... It is the time of mobilisation, of marching together, and we must go forward in close ranks, like silver in the veins of the Andes’. More than just calling for unity, Maurya (1995) argues that Martí’s differentiation between Our America and the ‘other America’ to the North provided a point of departure for identity politics in Latin America, with a unified regional Self constructed in opposition to the US Other. Our America, accordingly, subverts the label imposed by the oppressors, in that it still maintains Latin America as a classifiable whole but, in so doing, it enfranchises an emancipatory counter-identity based on essentialising difference between it and external actors (Saldívar 1991: xii).⁹

This Our American discourse reconfigures the boundaries of the region. Drawing upon this legacy of integration, ALBA-TCP promotes a series of policy positions based around barter arrangements – known as TCPs – that exchange goods and services with the aim of providing for the needs of those previously marginalised. It legitimates a range of agreements, including the exchange of foodstuffs, technology, infrastructure, health and human services, petrochemicals, raw materials and financial resources. Mission Robinson was one such early arrangement in which Cuba provided literacy programmes in exchange for subsidised Venezuelan oil; while similar exchanges continue to involve Cuban doctors (Mission *Barrio Adentro*) and Cuban ophthalmology services (Mission Miracle). These new social practices, in turn, promote transnational connections, with Bolivian medical students along with Dominican students in computer science, engineering, sports, physics, maths and agriculture now practising the concrete experience of regionness in Cuban and Venezuelan universities.

New Regionalism recognises this capacity for re-territorialising the region, wherein a geographical area shifts from a passive object to an active subject capable of articulating transnational interests (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000: 461). Here, an abiding Latin America, following a benevolent USA *as per* the Monroe position, is juxtaposed against a Bolivarian interpretation which alludes to an increasingly autonomous region concerned with the inclusion, welfare, security and dignity of previously excluded groups. Although the analysis below demonstrates the difficulty in reducing the region to a singular subject (active or otherwise) with set interests, this different take on Latin Americanness undoubtedly affects the inter-subjective framework within which various regional actors operate. For Bøås *et al.* (2003: 205) this evocation of meaning demonstrates how the region itself operates as a signifier. That is, more than a geographical reference, ‘Latin America’ becomes a contested term, evoking competing boundaries, actors, actions, histories and, in a more operational sense, policy positions. Notably, it is by conceiving the region as a signifier that further insights into the ontology of inter-subjectivity become possible.

An ontology of Latin Americanness

Jacques Derrida’s notions of *differance* and *undecidability* outline the ontological parameters of Latin Americanness. While the key component of *differance* relates

to the deferral of signs, it is the more Saussurean notion that is of use here. This production of difference for Derrida concerns the force which distinguishes various elements from one another that, in turn, underpins meaning. Although he suggests that this differentiation produces hierarchies and binary oppositions, Derrida (1988: 9) also describes the process as one of *espacement* or 'spacing' between absolutely different elements.¹⁰ It is this notion of spacing that is analogous to the spectrum opened up in the Americas. Spacing refers to the construction of a space 'in-between' a term and its opposite or, as conceived here, as the space between the two antagonistic definitions of Latin America. Having so far constituted both a Monroe and Bolivarian end of the antagonistic spectrum, it is within this space 'in-between' that an analysis of inter-subjectivity can begin.

Derrida's concept of undecidability provides further insight into the structural process within which the various regional actors operate to shape notions of identity and space. In contrast to an openness that posits the essential contestability of all identity and regulatory claims, undecidability instead designates a particular space and a regulated tension 'in-between' where meaning is elaborated. While this determinate oscillation between the strictly defined 'Our America' and the 'other America' has already been highlighted, the utility of undecidability as an analytical tool is the suggestion that the 'in-between' acts as the inter-subjective realm within which various Latin American actors make decisions (Norval 2004: 147). The ontological character of Latin Americanness thus begins to take shape as regional actions and enunciations are suspended within the field constituted by Monroe and Bolívar, or in a more contemporary guise, by Washington and ALBA-TCP. Far from meaning indeterminacy or an inability to decide, undecidability refers to the conditions necessary for the decision, as it provides the space to act (Derrida 1988: 148).¹¹ More importantly for the purposes here, it also outlines the parameters of inter-subjective meaning from which particular readings of regionness are then made possible.

Not only does undecidability point to the construction of inter-subjective meaning but, as is demonstrated below, it also reveals how various regional actors engage with and transform this inter-subjective structure. Indeed, to outline the ontological structure of Latin Americanness is not to argue that this inter-subjectively shared meaning acts directly and immediately on regional actors in a deterministic sense. Rather, the undecidable 'in-between' acts upon their actions. That is, it influences existing actions, or those which may arise, as it constitutes the main condition for action. In contrast to using undecidability as a predictive tool to explain decision-making mechanisms based on strategic, interest-based thinking, the objective here is to acknowledge how inter-subjectivity structures the decision/act but does not determine it, while the decision/act makes use of inter-subjective meaning but does not necessarily re-create it. As illustrated by Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986: 767), such a normative environment may guide, inspire, rationalise or justify behaviour, or, in contrast, it may be resisted. Actors, then, not only reproduce normative structures, but also change them through their very practice.

Shifts in economic policy are informative in this regard. Clearly the promotion of barter arrangements within ALBA-TCP reconfigures what was previously understood as economically feasible in the Americas. This does not mean,

however, that various regional actors necessarily adopt an either/or position in favour (or not) of economic change. Rather, it means that regional actors are able to draw upon an ALBA-like (or any other) example to develop their own positions. Indeed, it would be a mistake to place Brazil, for instance, in opposition to US-style economic development. Brasilia, along with a number of centre-left states – Uruguay, Nicaragua and El Salvador – continues to operate within broader neoliberal frameworks, if in slightly modified forms (Webber and Carr 2012: 1). These governments may be rhetorically against neoliberalism, however, in practice they enact only ‘mild redistributive programmes respectful of prevailing property relations’ and have proved capable of pushing ‘forward a new wave of capitalist globalisation with greater credibility than their orthodox neoliberal predecessors’ (Robinson 2008: 292). This level of nuance is also reflected in other regional organisations, notably the Andean Community (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru), but also MERCOSUR; an organisation of which Venezuela recently became a full member (also Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay; Chile and Bolivia as associates; and Paraguay as a currently suspended member). Moreover, conventional policy positions associated with the US model continue to retain their currency. US free trade agreements with Chile, Peru and Colombia, not to mention the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Dominican Republic–Central America–United States Free Trade Agreement, demonstrate the continued importance of this form of economic development.

Viewing these overlapping positions in reference to undecidability, what this level of plurality suggests is that particular actors and actions are drawn from a regulated tension that consists of a broader range of options than was apparent during the open regionalism orthodoxy of the 1990s. Put simply, the undecidable space within which future policy positions are suspended has been enlarged. While ALBA-TCP clearly has not replaced US-authored conceptions of economic development, they indicate the displacement of the ‘orthodox’ US model as *the* model for the region. Indeed, it is the multifaceted nature of this difference that speaks to a shift in regulatory practices that have in the past sought to confine Latin American development to particular models. Circulating within the Americas are policy positions undoubtedly aligned with neoliberal economic development, but so too are there a series of ideas that question this logic and its outcomes. In this setting, the underlying normative conditions of Latin Americaness change as new constraints or possibilities emerge – such as barter trade – or as new claimants – such as ALBA-TCP – make their presence felt. This change not only allows for a re-inscription of meaning, but also a re-configuration of Latin Americaness itself. The politics of regionness thus becomes an open and additive process, here understood in relation to economic development, wherein historical change and contestation over the form and direction of the region are placed at the centre of analysis.

More than influencing how regional actors operate, by exploring how readings of Latin America works alongside national imaginaries, it is possible to gain a clearer understanding of how the ontology of Latin Americaness – again, in terms of the inter-subjectively held identities, forms of behaviour and conceptions of space within the region – impacts upon particular actors. Far from an independent realm ‘out there’, the argument here is that the inter-subjective meaning

constitutive of Latin Americanness offers the various State and non-state actors an opportunity to translate their own political projects to suit their local ends. In this setting, the shared environment actually complements and legitimates national, sub-national and local identities. Following Katzenstein (2005: 76–86), it is suggested that regional identities do not necessarily replace national imaginaries, but represent an important catalyst in the evolution and dissemination of other identities.

The concepts of *Patria Grande* and *Patria Chica* [great(er) homeland and smaller homeland] best demonstrate the overlapping practices of space and identity. Here, the production of Latin Americanness takes place on multiple spatial scales, with Our America or *Patria Grande* reproduced as part of the broader social production of space. One of ALBA-TCP's (2004) first declarations asserted that:

the cardinal principle that has to guide ALBA is a deeper solidarity between the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean, that was sustained in the thought of Bolívar, Martí, Sucre, O'Higgins, San Martín, Hidalgo, Pétion, Morazán, Sandino among others . . . the objective to construct a *Patria Grande* in Latin America.

The politics of regionness are here linked to the politics of space, wherein 'Latin America' is discursively constituted as carrying forward the radical zeal epitomised by the national revolutionary figures of Venezuela, Cuba, Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, Mexico, Haiti, Honduras and Nicaragua respectively. Latin America as *Patria Grande* contains this cumulative national (*Patria Chica*) revolutionary spirit that today places it in opposition to Washington.

In contrast to mutually exclusive conceptions of space, *Patria Grande* and *Patria Chica* potentially interweave as much as they displace one another, enabling multiple affiliations and a larger social space of belonging. Yes, *Patria Grande* is still predicated on an inside/outside boundary, however, contrary to state-based divisions, this boundary potentially extends the Our American space beyond the confines of particular Latin American nation-states. In this setting, although *Patria Grande* does not displace local notions of nation, it undoubtedly affects how people comprehend their nation and themselves, and, consequently, reshapes the inter-subjective realm from which notions of identity and difference are formulated. Moreover, this shift in national imaginaries is only compounded by the increase in transnational connections forged through new social practices like barter arrangements. This suggests a more flexible practice of spatiality, whereby the lived experience of regionness does not necessarily correlate with fixed boundaries. Latin Americanness is thus understood as a process of social transformation that is produced, performed, symbolised and institutionalised through multiple practices (Paasi 2002: 803).

The recognition of *Pacha Mama* [Mother Earth] within the Bolivarian Alliance further reveals how the production of Latin Americanness is a truncated process that operates at multiple spatial levels. Adopted in 2010 through the Declaration of Otavalo, ALBA-TCP (2010) embraces *Pacha Mama* as living in harmony with nature as well as deepening equity and autonomy. It encompasses the

natural world – itself viewed as a sentient being – with indigenous peoples closely tied to *Pacha Mama*. In Bolivia, *Pacha Mama* has come to embody an all-encompassing worldview wherein an ecologically friendlier economic model is embedded within Marxist social values (Balbus 2011: 24). Bolivian President Evo Morales outlined this approach in relation to climate change as: ‘Pacha Mama o muerte’. While resurrecting the traditional refrain of ‘socialism or death’, the Bolivian notion of socialism not only differs from that proposed by Lenin and the Castros, but more recently also from the ‘21st Century Socialism’ practised in Venezuela. Founded on living in harmony with *Pacha Mama*, this is a more ‘communitarian socialism’. As Bolivian Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca described in 2009: ‘we are incorporating into socialism something that has survived for 500 years: the communitarian element. We want to build our own socialism’ (cited in International Journal of Socialist Renewal 2009).

Far from the diffusion of a common ecological worldview ‘out there’, within ALBA-TCP *Pacha Mama* became institutionalised through a discourse of indigenous socialism promoted not by the established leadership, but by previously marginalised actors traditionally viewed as inconsequential to regional politics. Here, historically excluded indigenous actors – principally in Bolivia and Ecuador – profited from a more radical, Bolivarian reading of Latin Americaness wherein those formerly maligned are encouraged to participate in social and political life.

The lesson here, as suggested earlier, is that although the various regional actors are subjected to the same normative environment, they do not necessarily adopt similar identities and interests, but draw upon these inter-subjectively shared norms in multiple ways. In drawing upon a shared emancipatory setting, for example, indigenous groups promoted localised knowledge forms that would reconfigure both the ontology of Latin Americaness and the institutional make-up of ALBA-TCP itself. This shift centres on the final component of the Alliance’s name: the *People’s Trade Treaty* and the concept of *Buen Vivir*.

Since their entry into ALBA-TCP, Bolivia (2006) and Ecuador (2009) have undertaken steps to strengthen equity and autonomy. Based on the indigenous ideals of *suma qamaña* in Aymara (Bolivia) and *sumak kawsay* in Quechua (Ecuador), *Buen Vivir* is now enshrined in their respective constitutions as attempts to rescue local knowledge and practices and, in the process, fashion a more egalitarian social system. Moreover, these concepts have become integral to the development of Latin Americaness as defined and practised within the Bolivarian Alliance. The *People’s Trade Treaty* that makes up the final component in the ALBA-TCP name is directly drawn from *Buen Vivir*, with its ‘Fundamental Principles’ guided by the ideals of ‘complementarity, solidarity and cooperation so as to *Vivir Bien*’ (ALBA-TCP 2009). This ‘solidarity economics’ as espoused within *suma qamaña/sumak kawsay* operates alongside a shared desire to challenge the status quo – as is apparent in the Bolivarian reading of Latin Americaness – and at the same time is operationalised to promote a more ecologically minded form of development. In place of neoliberal free trade agreements, TCPs capitalise on each country’s comparative advantage, but do so in order to ensure mutual benefit, employment expansion, access to markets and resource conservation. Emblematic of this drive is a series of *grannacionales* that involve inter-state programmes and joint ventures for the provision of the already mentioned human

services such as education, healthcare and the development of basic industries such as food, petrochemicals and steel. Seeking to ‘maximize employment opportunities and the overall development of ALBA nations’, the *grannacionales* can be divided into two categories. While programmes such as ALBA Health and ALBA Education operate under the heading of *Program Grannacionales*; companies such as ALBA Transportation and ALBA trade are categorised as *Company Grannacionales* (Gürcan 2010: 25). Collectively, these initiatives promote state and local institutions so as to deepen social services, rather than opening them up to market logics.

While this outline of ALBA programmes is far from exhaustive, it demonstrates how the production of Latin Americaness extends beyond the State-as-actor. Following Hettne and Söderbaum (2000: 464), it is suggested that as the region-building process intensifies, a number of new actors appear at different societal levels, with cooperation increasingly dependent on a complex pattern of relations. It is within this setting that the construction of regionness not only takes place through official discursive practices, but also through the lived experience of peoples and how they interact with and reconfigure these practices within, for example, the *grannacionales*. As the cases of *Pacha Mama* and *Buen Vivir* demonstrate, normative convergence and the construction of commonality operate at multiple, interwoven (local, national and regional) levels and involve multiple actors. As a result, new ideas and practices are brought within the field of possibility. No longer situated ‘outside’ what is deemed permissible, the inter-subjective field of Latin Americaness is expanded so as to enable policy options – be they barter arrangements and/or greater environmental protections – that are now increasingly relevant to regional actors. Indeed, what both *Pacha Mama* and *Buen Vivir* reveal is how the politics of regionness is a dynamic process. An appreciation of Latin Americaness thus becomes an open and fluid activity, with multiple agents capable of continually constructing their region and themselves.

Conclusions

This paper has outlined the importance of shared inter-subjective beliefs, ideas and rituals to the construction and operation of a region. By taking such an approach, it contributes to the debate over ‘what we study when we study regionalism’ by exclusively focusing on that which is shared. This focus on inter-subjectivity tries to overcome approaches that treat shared social structures as already fixed, and/or as autonomous constructs operating over and above regional actors. Inter-subjectivity alone cannot hold regional actors together, nor can it be read as a teleological process of invariably acquiring a similar outlook via diffusion or aggregation. Far from a separate realm ‘out there’, various regional actors – be they States, transnational indigenous peoples or previously maligned domestic groups – operate within and reconstruct this inter-subjective space. It is this interaction – theorised through an appreciation of structuration – where various agents interact with (and simultaneously rework) social meaning and an understanding of regionness itself.

Having transferred many of these insights into the study of regionness from thinking on regimes, the paper inadvertently raises questions over the compatibility between these two themes. While it has borrowed an understanding of how various actors engage with and modify the inter-subjective quality of regimes, so too are there factors that potentially distinguish the study of regimes from regions. One such factor relates to the issue of space. Although regimes are clearly bound up within particular geopolitical imaginaries – be it the ‘West’ or a society of states placed in opposition to rogue and/or failed states – their linkage with a territorially defined space is more arbitrary. While the space of ALBA-TCP is far from geographically contiguous, it does operate within an established spatiality of Latin America. To this extent, what distinguishes the study of regionness from regimes is how territoriality becomes a constitutive element in the politics of identity, operating alongside the markers of ethnicity, class, language, religion and so on. Although both regimes and regions are discursively constituted, that the latter are rooted in a geographical space means that the various regional practitioners have greater ideational resources – be it here notions of *Patria Grande*, or an Our America which shares a revolutionary tradition – that are less apparent in relation to regimes. Indeed, border thinking becomes essential to the construction of space, with the dividing line of the Rio Grande integral to a more radical, Bolivarian reading of the Pan-American debate.

Rather than exclusively focusing on the geographical edges of the region, however, border thinking is also found in a variety of discursive and social practices that are lived through by multiple regional actors. Whether it is the transnational cooperation apparent in the *grannacionales*, or an Our American collective, revolutionary region, the production of space is constitutive of agents and again informs the inter-subjective realm. Latin Americaness thus becomes open and additive, as multiple agents modify the boundaries of acceptable ways of being and behaving.

An ontology of Latin Americaness – in terms of the inter-subjectively held identities, forms of behaviour and conceptions of space within the region – then, can be understood as offering a space of translation for particular actors. The parameters of this ontological space are informed by the notion of undecidability, wherein the Monroe and radical Bolivarian definitions of Latin America constitute the field within which multiple regional actors operate. However, while acknowledging how inter-subjectivity helps constitute local, national and regional identities/interests, it does not do so in a deterministic sense. The claim that actors are shaped by the inter-subjective structure is different from the assertion that their interests and identities are derived in a mechanical way from these structures. Rather, this inter-subjective space itself is altered as new constraints or possibilities emerge – such as barter trade – or as new agents – such as ALBA-TCP – make their presence felt. Concerns over challenging the status quo within the Bolivarian reading and improving the lives of those previously marginalised, for example, saw an overlap of different positions, wherein TCPs were neither one position (*Buen Vivir* and Bolivian notions of communitarian socialism), nor the other (Our America and a revolutionary tradition), but a hybrid of the two. Far from surrendering individual traits, the collective experience allowed for – and profited from – particular forms of identity and interests. It is in this context that the paper defines the ontology of inter-subjectivity as being determined

through social practice, wherein multiple actors interact with and re-work what they share in common. It is these social practices and the continual negotiation with the shared setting that are at the heart of defining regionness and its institutional architecture.

Notes

1. For analysis on the importance of a hegemon for regime stability, see Gilpin (1987: 86) and Webb and Krasner (1989).
2. Developed by Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum, 'regionness' links social, political and institutional aspects of region building. Instead of focusing solely on material incentives – in terms of the costs and benefits of cooperation – it also explores how ideational factors such as culture and identity shape a region. It emphasises the importance of shared knowledge and ideational forces in forging both the normative and institutional structures of a region, thereby enabling an appreciation of how interests and identities change over time to empower new forms of cooperation and community. While Hettne and Söderbaum offer a typology of regionness that consists of five levels (regional space, regional complex, regional society, regional community and regional state), the focus here centres on the politics of regionness in terms of the social construction of a region, including the various actors and forms of behaviour that are legitimated within its boundaries. For more, on the typologies of regionness, see Hettne (2005) and Hettne and Söderbaum (2000).
3. For Kenneth Waltz the distribution of capabilities is the key determinant in explaining State behaviour, particularly those 'weaker' states. This results in weaker State largely aligning themselves – or bandwagoning as it is referred to in much of the literature – to stronger, 'Western' states. For more, see Waltz (1979: 171). Moreover, such views have restrictive implications for Latin America. Integration for these non-hegemonic actors is more problematic, Keohane (1984: 244) argues, as such integration takes place among independent states motivated more by self-interest in an anarchical international setting rather than the common good. For a similar argument, see Greico (1997).
4. Building on these factors, Adler and Barnett (1996: 87) suggest that the regional division of labour and/or the potential benefits to be gained from trade may also encourage the development of regional institutions.
5. Interestingly, Wendt (1999: 152, 155) makes similar claims regarding rational choice; claims that he seeks to move beyond – inadequately in the opinion of this paper – by distinguishing between ontological and explanatory individualism.
6. The constructivism referred to here relates to the already mentioned work of Wendt, Barnett and Adler. For the sake of clarification, however, this point does not relate to all constructivist thinking. Clearly the work of Kratochwil, Katzenstein, Neumann and Paasi also referred to in this paper are not bundled in with this group.
7. For more on this division, see Mace and Thérien (1996: 3–7) and Riggiozzi (2012).
8. The membership of ALBA currently includes Venezuela, Cuba, Ecuador, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Dominica, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, St Lucia and Antigua and Barbuda. Haiti is also a permanent observer.
9. In making this point it is acknowledged that the label 'America' is Spanish in origin, named after the explorer Amerigo Vespucci. The contestation, in this sense, comes from resistance to the term 'America' being used by the United States to refer exclusively to itself as an 'over-arching synthesis'.
10. For more on the implications of *espacement*, including practices of archi-writing and presence, see Derrida (1997). While for a great summary of this terms and its implications, see Critchley (1992: 37–8).
11. While using undecidability as an analytical tool, it is recognised that this usage does not strictly abide by that proposed by Derrida. For Derrida, it is the simultaneous possibility/impossibility of the decision – that both enables and disables itself – which constitutes the *aporetic* situation of undecidability. Placed in these terms, the above usage attempts to step beyond an understanding of the undecidable *per se* to an appreciation of the decision itself. That is, in having outlined the realm of undecidability that constitutes notions of economic development, for example, it is within this space – this struggle to define development – that structures the decision. Similar to arguments put forward by Simon Critchley and Ernesto Laclau, it is this antagonism that constitutes the political space in which the decision is made. More than a moment of madness, as suggested by Kierkegaard, yes the decision is without foundation – both in terms of a transcendental subject and, more specifically here, in terms of any positive grounding of a fixed definition of

economic development – however, this does not limit an appreciation of the decision. Indeed, it is the decision that provides an insight into the structures of undecidability, thereby proving an insight into what is deemed possible. The jump from the experience of undecidability to a decision becomes the point of analysis. For more on this largely Laclauian take on undecidability, see Laclau (1996: 54); while for Critchley’s argument that this ‘jump’ constitutes an ethical moment, see Critchley (1992: 192, 236, 1996).

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