

In the beginning was the Word.
(THE BIBLE, THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN, 1)

Chapter 2

DIVING INTO THEORETICAL WATERS

2.1 TALE OF CONCEPTS

Once I asked an internationally recognised Professor about the purpose of political scientists. My question must have sounded like: "What are we doing on this earth?" Professor's reply was prompt enough: "My dear friend, you seem to have an existential problem". Despite the humorous hue, he carried on with an argument about contributing to the search of truth about human beings and reasons and the understanding of their behaviour. Theories accompany us in search of the truth. The complexity of social interactions on economic, political, cultural and other, you name it, levels makes a unified and 'right' theory, as a mission impossible. Hence, social sciences frequently come up with different perspectives on the same phenomena. However, theories as systemic, coherent and interrelated sets of empirically verified statements about the functioning of the real world are sound arguments for those who want to classify, explain, understand

and even predict. Theories can easily be employed as a set of guidelines for a research. This chapter discusses earlier theoretical approaches to and key terms of regional studies and provides a new analytical model for the examination of political regions.

Undoubtedly, the end of the Cold War seriously challenged the well-established principles of theories on international relations and brought re-conceptualisation of research on regions. Weaknesses of the "old school" of theories, with (Neo)Realism in the lead, to adequately explain and predict the events like the end of the Cold War, the break-up of the USSR and so on paved the road for the emergence of Social Constructivism and the Reflectivist paradigm in the discipline of International Relations.⁶ Debates among the Rationalists, the Constructivists and the Reflectivists in the 1990s replaced the theoretical quarrels of the 1980s among Realism, Pluralism (Liberalism) and Globalism (Marxism) and their "neo-s". Realism and Liberalism became similar on ontological and epistemological grounds and formed a core of the Rationalist paradigm. According to it, the reality is given and material and can be scientifically analysed. According to the Rationalists, material factors are far more important than ideas, thereof structures in international politics affect the behaviour of actors. On the other hand, the Reflectivist paradigm embraces Postmodernism, Feminism, Critical and Normative theories, Historical Sociology, radical Constructivism and some more. Their uniting basis has so far mostly relied on an extensive criticism of the Rationalist paradigm. The Reflectivists deny the possibility to objectively and scientifically investigate social reality which is social and intersubjective, and a value-laden interpretation is inseparably attached to the factors analysed.

In the meantime, Constructivism has been trying to establish a middle ground between the Rationalist and the Reflectivist (interpretative)

⁶ Robert Keohane was the first to admit an input of the Reflectivists into the analysis of International Relations in 1988 (Keohane 1988 in Miniotaité 2000, 196).

paradigms, while being able to talk to and be criticised by both poles (Adler 1997b). For example, in terms of epistemology, Reflectivists criticising Constructivists argue that the focus on the state is made at the expense of race, class, gender, ethnicity, etc., and the acceptance of anarchy in international relations turn Constructivism into another positivist theory. Rationalists state that Constructivism underestimates the importance of material factors. In general, Constructivism embodies a vast variety of approaches such as Social, Radical, Cultural, Cognitive, Critical, Postmodern, etc. The “middle ground” of Social Constructivists shares an ontological basis with Reflectivists (reality is intersubjective and social) and an epistemological one – with Rationalists (reality can be objectively analysed). Individuals socially construct structures which limit the choice of actors in foreign policy making (Statkus and Paulauskas 2006, 16–18). This study, however, from the epistemological point of view, shifts towards Reflectivists and benefits from the methodological employment of the post-positivistic discourse analysis of language in the study of collective identities. Collective identity is a self-perception based on commonalities of “We” and differences from “They”. Constructivism agrees that identity is anything but natural and can be invented and re-invented in social interaction. Yet Constructivists do not ignore state preferences and investigate on which basis these are constructed (Christiansen et al. 2001, 5, 9, 12). According to this approach, the actor’s identity shaped by history, society’s values, practices, and institutions determines his/her behaviour.

When it comes to studies of regions among states, the Rationalist paradigm examines regions in terms of geographical, economic, military, environmental, cultural, etc. politics. The Rationalists do not believe in the power of language, referring to it as merely “symbolic discourses” or rhetoric. With the rise of Constructivist insights in the 1990s and onwards, studies of regions have focused on the ways regions arise from redefinition of norms and identities by the key region-builders, first of all governments. The Constructivists assume regions to be shaped by collective perception of identities, shared values and trust (Väyrynen

2003, 26–27, 37). Neorealists Stacie E. Goddard and Daniel H. Nexon admit that identities must be taken into consideration as they complement Neorealist insights (Goddard and Nexon 2005).

The Constructivists assume that human agents reproduce social reality via their daily practices, first of all through creating of meanings in the language. Human agents are interconnected in their social environment and collectively share a system of meanings or “culture” in a broader sense. The Constructivists do not treat political phenomena as permanently fixed and stress instead an importance of perceptions of and ideas about reality. The Rationalists say there is a natural economic, cultural, security, religious basis for a region via a number of links between states and peoples, whereas the Constructivists see the core of a region to be anything but natural, since regions can be politically invented and reinvented.

Formation of regions goes through different stages, forms and logic. The definition of “region” embraces two dimensions. The first one refers to a sub-state level in which municipalities, counties, districts, border regions, etc. comprise a state’s internal units. These so-called “micro-regions” frequently draw attention of federalism studies. The second approach refers to the interstate relation. It has three references in terms of region size. The first one denotes “mega-regions”, that is, large groups of states. The second category, called “regions” or “sub-regions”, describes smaller clusters of states that constitute part of a larger region as, e.g., the Baltic states.⁷ Finally, “trans-regions” consist both of states and their parts (micro-regions), for example, the Baltic Sea trans-region.⁸

⁷ It is difficult to operationalise a relation between a region and a sub-region, as usually many regions are parts of larger regional entities. Therefore, the concept of “sub-region” in this study will be employed to denote the trilateral Baltic cluster.

⁸ The Baltic Sea trans-region consists of Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, north-western territories of Russia as the Kaliningrad *oblast* and St. Petersburg area and the northern *Länder* of Germany. Due to a close Nordic cooperation, Norway and Iceland are included into the trans-region too.

Academic research dealing with the emergence of regions often deal with cooperation, integration or region-building. Such studies are concerned with outcomes of activities of regional actors. The terms “regional integration”, “regional cooperation” and “regional organisation” are closely related. Analyses of regional integration, in general, try to explain how and why states voluntarily mangle losing attributes of sovereignty and acquiring new techniques for resolving conflicts among themselves (Haas 1971). Regional cooperation, in turn, covers any interstate activity designed to meet commonly experienced economic, political and social challenges. Identity and the subsequent interest-driven cooperation among the states is a process of actors’ adjustment of their behaviour to actual or anticipated preferences of others through the process of policy coordination (Milner 1992). Regional cooperation is often linked with neighbouring countries. Their selection draws a line between insiders and outsiders of a given geographical entity. Regional cooperation is, as a rule, institutionalised in a regional organisation. Both cooperation and regional organisation can either describe steps towards integration or be a separate focus of studies. In any event, the majority of cooperative templates signal a “new deal” among neighbouring countries. In this study, region-building is synonymous with construction of political regions which is linked to dominant regional identities and affiliated cooperative practices.

If identity is considered as a social and deliberate construct, then many things can fall within self-perception. As Benedict Andersen has observed, groups (e.g., nations, regions, societies, minorities, etc.) are “imagined communities” (Andersen 1983) and identity builders can integrate relevant aspects of collective affinities: religion, territory, history, future, language, interests and so forth. There is also a need to select, invent, mythologize and sustain group commonalities in order to get them accepted as “togetherness”. Obvious regional similarities, according to the Constructivists, are not as important as decisions or perceptions of the intellectual and political elites who decide which similarities can bear relevance and be sustained in practice. Political region-building

is a politicians’ affair: regions, as imagined communities, materialise where politicians want them to materialise.

Studies of regions have undergone a tremendous development in international politics for the last fifty years. The very first studies of regions emerged as part of International Relations in the late 1950s and recuperated as a study area of International Political Economy in the late 1980s. The sustainability of a nation-state, the growth and formalisation of social sciences and integration practices in Europe got scholars to take stock of interstate formats (Breslin et al 2002, 2). Arguably, first studies of regionalism were mostly preoccupied with economic integration and its growing political sophistication. Alas, the academic exaltation of European integration did not only push studies of regions towards economics, but became considerably teleological and prejudiced in scholarly writings. Almost all cooperative practices were measured by the European shoes. Failures to apply European integration elsewhere and underestimation of the role of national governments back-lashed upon theorisation of integration and its predictive capacity (Haas 1975, Moravcsik 1991, Schmitter 2004). Political practices preceded the theorising: revival of regional integration came about with the Single European Act in the late 1980s. The European patterns of integration re-ignited scholarly interests in regionalism with the Neofunctionalist stress on supranationality. In the long run, researchers have accommodated federalist approaches, normative and legal theories and various forms of policy analysis on integration (Breslin et al 2002, 4).

Although present studies of regions extrapolated beyond a classical examination of economic integration alone, economic policies and neo-liberal paradigms are still very influential in assessments of regionalism and regionalisation due to the EU (Breslin et al 2002, 11). The application of the European integration logic via increasing institutionalisation is teleological and usually foreseen as a template for regional studies. In such an event, regional developments different from European political practices have been labelled as “loose” or “soft” (Katzenstein 1996). Sovereignty-bound region-builders elsewhere kept an eye on integra-

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The monograph of Mindaugas Jurkynas, I think the author will take no offence, still young associated professor at the Institute of International Relations and Political Science of Vilnius University, is especially significant for those who have a craving for the studies of foreign policy. The analysis of the book, first of all enables to broaden stereotypical framework of foreign policy. This is not only a classic diplomacy, bilateral and multilateral relations but also fundamental phenomena concerning foreign policy subjects: nationality, identity, regionalism and other factors which have so far been recited as components of "low" foreign policy. Mindaugas, as a scientist and a true-blue representative of Suvalkija (Suduva) region, has cunningly broken the stereotypes of such nature.

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Jurkynas' pioneering study provides the most thorough analysis so far of the processes through which political regions in the three Baltic countries were constructed, historically and in particular in the post-1992 period. The study is well-researched: The number of documents and statements included in the analyses is high and the analyses are comprehensive and comparative (across time, actors, countries, regions etc.). The study is mandatory reading for anyone interested in the international relations of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

In 2006, the Vilis Vitols Prize Committee of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies awarded its prize for best article in the *Journal of Baltic Studies* for 2004 to Mindaugas Jurkynas for his article "Brotherhood Reconsidered: Region-Building in the Baltics" on which the book is based.

