Book Reviews


As European integration came to a standstill in the seventies and a considerable number of other attempts at closer regional cooperation failed, the theory of regional integration was declared obsolete. Today, just thirty years later, there hardly seems to be any other aspect of the international system drawing more attention than the phenomenon of a new regionalism. Since 1995 there have been more than 125 registered regional trade agreements within the WTO framework. Furthermore, regions like the Asian-Pacific show a before unknown dynamic of regional integration, which started with the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1989. Undoubtedly, regionalism is on the rise. And theory? There has been no general theoretical approach to explain the new regionalism. Instead, broad paradigms of theories of international relations are applied to this phenomenon, mainly focusing on its function. Within this context, the work of Manuela Spindler fills a considerable gap between empirical interest and missing theoretical foundations. She develops a social constructivist approach to the new regionalism, revealing its ideal dimension and showing that regions are primarily a social construction in and of themselves.

Her analysis starts with two case studies dealing with the European program for a single domestic market in the mid-eighties and the emergence of the APEC in the early nineties. Furthermore, Spindler discusses current forms of Trans- and Interregionalism, focusing on the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) and the Transatlantic Economic Partnership (TEP). As a common feature, the author identifies a shared concept of market-centered integration and a strong orientation towards a global economy. In addition, Spindler stresses the role of private transnational actors influencing on or even initializing processes of regionalization, as in the case of APEC.
On this empirical foundation, she moves towards a social constructivist perspective focusing on the inter-subjective dimension of order structures. After developing a holistic conceptualization of regionalism as regionalized order, Spindler contrasts this macro-theoretical approach with a particularistic conceptualization of regionalism as a process of social construction. She concludes that the ideological character of regionalized orders is primarily constituted of an inter-subjective perception from which actors construct regions.

Her analysis of APEC in the second chapter may be seen as exemplary for her theoretical concept. In contrast to the regionalized international post-World War II order, which Spindler characterizes as an embedded liberalism—being outwardly protectionist, while promoting liberalization of trade on the domestic market—APEC shows features that are of a fundamentally different character (e.g. unilateral cutback of trade barriers on the ground of the most favored nation (MFN) treatment between APEC countries and towards non-member states, reciprocity of liberalization advantages towards non-members).

She identifies the classical form of embedded liberalism as an order structure, which primarily served the interests of multinational corporations. Due to the collapse of Bretton Woods, the abolishment of capital flow controls, and the deregulation of the financial market, which have ultimately led to a global capital market, multinational corporations have transformed into transnational actors whose set of preferences has fundamentally changed. Following Margaret Archer’s morphogenetic approach towards structural change, this altered inter-subjective perception among transnational companies has led to a challenge to the ideology of embedded liberalism and a variety of activities to foster structural elaboration. The author understands the construction of order systems in the sense of imposing international purpose. As agents of this international purpose, transnational companies use the market as a source of power to impose influence on political outcomes. Against this background, the process, which led to the founding of APEC, is particularly insightful. Spindler identifies the Pacific Trade and Development Forum (PAFTAD), the Pacific Basin Economic Council (PBEC) and the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC) as driving forces of regional integration. These think tanks, forums, and networks are instruments of transnational actors who share the idea of an open regionalism based on the principles of liberal market centered integration in the Asian-Pacific region. Thanks to their high-level members and close contacts in the political sphere, they have been able to exert great influence on governments over time, culminating in the Australian initiative for a closer regional economic cooperation in 1989.