

Understanding regionalism in post-apartheid Southern Africa

A breath of expectation could almost be heard across Africa when South Africa crossed the boundary to post-apartheid. The spectre of Mandela towered as large over the African continent as did the spectre of globalisation. When the apartheid state gave way to democratic elections, a new moment for the Southern African region thus opened. One of the offspring of this new moment was the embrace of a unified region in Southern Africa.

There was now a greater expectation that the countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a group of 14 member-states, would work together to strengthen the region. An expectation was that greater regional co-operation could assist member countries to survive the new global order, what some call 'globalisation'. With the threat of Africa being pushed to the margins of this new global order, stronger regionalism has been seen as one defensive strategy. With this renewed regional awareness comes the possibility for different social claims to the region, a new space of openness into which a variety of contenders can step.

Global changes have also contributed to regional awareness, making regionalism a sub-narrative or junior partner of globalisation. Cut-throat globalisation has seen nations turn to regional blocs as a means of survival. This kind of Darwinian regionalism sees a global system of

Bethuel Maserumule and Darlene Miller argue that institutional and state-led analyses of regionalism are inadequate, and propose a society-centred approach.

winners and losers, the survival of those who are fittest to play by new global rules. In the global order, trading blocs pivot around a powerful Triad or threesome – the US, Japan and Europe. This hegemonic Triad captures most of the world's capital flows. Less developed countries cluster around this Triad and attract some of these flows of money and commodities.

Regional trading blocs have formed around these economic clusters. Amongst these are:

- NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), a new formation with the US at the helm;
- the EC (European Community), revived in the 1990s with the Maastricht Agreement;
- the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), where Japan is a leading member.

Looking over their shoulders at these regional alliances, less developed countries have rushed to emulate this trend, with

the revival of blocs such as MERCOSUR (Southern Cone Common Market) in Latin America and SADC and COMESA (Common Market in Eastern and Southern Africa) in Southern Africa. Dominant understandings of globalisation as the only reality percolated down into approaches to regionalism in the 1990s.

History

Taking a longer look over the 20th century shows how different phases of regionalism have gone alongside cycles of global capitalism. Integration fever often gripped Europe, giving rise to different customs unions and inter-state alliances since the 1800s. These regionalist schemes had mixed levels of success, often coming to nothing. One of the key Eurocentric policies was regional integration, based on the functional interaction of states. Inter-state activities involved some level of interdependence because of the cross-border movements of people and goods.

This interdependence and interconnectedness necessitated forms of interaction between states, impelling states towards regional integration arrangements. Southern Africa too became integrated through the urbanised regional economies of mines and men, and the agricultural labour of the women who subsidise the mineworkers' families back in the rural areas. While the mining houses politically consolidate their regional economic activities, white settler communities also constitute racialised regional blocs in Southern Africa. Regional integration is thus more about *regional reintegration* when one examines the history of the last century.

Hegemonic regionalisms were also challenged in the past by counter-hegemonic regionalisms. Less developed countries went through moods of global acquiescence and resistance to hegemonic

regional schemes. In the 1950s and early 1960s Eurocentric models of customs unions and modernisation dominated groupings such as the LAFTA (Latin American Free Trade Association) and the Caribbean Free Trade Association (CARIFTA). But growing awareness of the inequalities between nation-states at the global level and relations of dependency between rich and poor countries led to the desire to delink or lessen reliance on the wealthy nations. More protectionist forms of regionalism arose with 'collective self-reliance' becoming a model for economically weaker regions. Economic transformation, redistribution of global wealth, increased employment and challenging the exploitative cross-border activities of transnational corporations inform a vision of an NIEO (New International Economic Order).

Regionalism in Latin America thus took on counter-hegemonic overtones. In Southern Africa, the Third Worldist regionalism of SADCC (Southern African Development Co-operation Community) hoped for a 'Trade union of the poor'. These hopes floundered against the pull of the apartheid state's economic power in the region.

State-led regionalism thus sees regional co-operation as a way of making economies at different levels of development work together. This requires some level of harmonisation and integration of trade and investment, institutions that organise this co-operation, currency and banking systems, and regional transport and infrastructure systems. Issues raised are how goods and capital flow in and out of countries, whether there should be limits on these flows, how these flows come from outside the region into the region, who inside the region trades with whom and what tariffs are charged for these cross-border

activities. These are the some of the regional questions that give South African Trade and Industry Minister, Alec Erwin, and his deputies sleepless nights.

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These state-led policies are shaping the agenda of regional trade unions and evolving into a set of related concerns about harmonisation of regional labour markets. Some of the regional trade union headaches are regional bargaining systems, state-capital-labour alliances or social compacts at the regional level, regional organisations for trade unions and the fractious question of a 'social clause' for the region where trade and investment activities will be limited by regional agreements on labour standards. Trade union strategies are driven by these national economic comparisons. If the countries of the region become integrated, how will workers in the region be integrated? Should regional institutions such as SADC be used to force member states to comply with regional minimum regulations?

Societal relations

Suspending this focus on institutional regulation for a moment, let us look at broader societal relations in the region. A regulatory focus limits the discussion of labour's alternatives to state-led and trade union-led institutions. While such regulatory concerns are valid, they frame the discussion of alternative or counter-hegemonic regionalisms within Eurocentric notions of economic integration. State-led structures and trade unions become the pivot of these analyses,

excluding the dynamic regional processes unfolding around newly proletarianised and unorganised workers, informal systems of commodity production and distribution in the region and the vast unemployed and contingent African workforces that are the regional reality today. Institutional regionalism thus runs the risk of not only being state-centred but also of being a set of formal models that do not capture the reality of regional processes. Such institutionalism needs to be prised open to allow more expansive, society-centred approaches to regionalism.

We would like to suggest the concepts of 'regional perceptions' and 'regional identities' as two takes on society-centred regionalism. Regional perceptions may be understood as a way of organising, thinking about and acting on regional society. We often think of society as constructed at the local and national levels. But society is also constructed at the regional level. Institutional structures enforce a way of thinking about the region. Regional structures such as SADC and SATUCC (Southern African Trade Union Co-ordinating Committee) give institutional expression to regional power relations. SADC and COMESA, for example, advocate free trade and investment areas as the route to economic growth and development. SATUCC, on the other hand, ventures that workers should have regional solidarity policies and support each other in their demands for better conditions.

These institutions are one level at which regional perceptions are consolidated. Geometries of power govern who has the most institutional clout to back up these perceptions and objectives. Regional identities are the collectivities that cohere around these regional perceptions and objectives. Social groups form and make claims on the basis of their

perceived interests, at the local, national or regional levels. In this sense the region is also a space of claims in which competing regionalisms vie for dominance, but not on an equitable basis. In other words, some regionalisms are more important than others, and regional perceptions are more likely to be shaped by those who wield economic or social power. SATUCC's limitations, then, are not only about resources and organisational capacity. An unclear approach to regional perceptions, regional identities and the processes of regionalisation that shape and make these identities and perceptions will be a fundamental source of political weakness.

Beyond the institutional forms of power are regional perceptions about xenophobia and national chauvinism, about who should lead in the region and who should follow. Such regional perceptions continue to be framed in terms of national states and demonstrate the continued importance of the nation-state in the region today. Such regional perceptions still focus on the nation-state. But the social, economic and cultural interactions and interdependencies of workers, managers, consumers, informal traders and a host of other social agents at the regional level shape regional geometries of power.

Regional perceptions

Perceptions of regional geometries of power are critical in trade union alliances. If COSATU appears to dominate regional trade union relations, the environment for regional solidarity could be very fractious, with other trade unions distrusting the leadership of the most coherent labour movement regionally. If unions of other member-states fear that the South African trade union movement will perpetuate apartheid-inherited geometries of power, they may play dead in regional solidarity

attempts, without actually coming out and challenging COSATU. South African unions enjoy the advantage of numerical strength, financial self-sufficiency, research capacity and international stature. This enables COSATU to be tempestuous and confident in labour issues, making them vulnerable to perceptions of arrogance, pride and trade union sub-imperialism, the 'Americans of Africa'.

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those who are closely tied into the state. This may be understood as the extent of post-national sensibilities in the region. Those countries such as Zambia and Zimbabwe that have gone through independence and social compacts with the ruling party, and who have since gone into opposition to the state may have one vision of regionalism. Trade unions such as COSATU and the OTM (Organisation of Mozambican Workers) that are institutionalised into state-labour compacts may have very different perceptions of regionalism.

Analysing the contours of these post-national sensibilities may be more fruitful in finding the material and political bases for regional solidarity than a long list of what resources a functioning regional office requires. The ties of COSATU to the ANC government has led to a strong regional perception or feeling that the South African labour movement is a conduit for propagating the hegemonic regional

interests of the South African government. The commonality of position between COSATU and the state on the social clause is one instance of the regional effects of this alliance. Similarly, resistance to opening up South African markets to imports from the rest of the region also lends credence to this perception.

These regional power relations and social interactions are sometimes less visible than institutional processes, but no less important. Institutional regionalism produces a silence around the voices of women, rural peasants, unorganised and informal workers and other segments of working class life that are reduced to the fuzzy category of civil society. Such state-centred regionalism also limits the way we understand trade unions in the region, and the importance of regional perceptions in allowing the development of a coherent regional identity. A productive, counter-hegemonic regionalism will need to be based on far-reaching concessions to the small economies of the region.

Challenge for unions

As the labour movement of the region's superpower, South African trade unions will need to show a simultaneous commitment to regional and national working class interests. South African unions will need to do more to show that their top priority is commitment to the interests of the regional working people by exploiting their organisational and material resources to strengthen their counterparts in the region to become effective representatives of their constituencies. While this holds truer for South Africa, it also applies to other trade unions within the region. Collective identities of trade unions need to be extended beyond the national level, and notions of regional citizenship should be explored. Regional standards can then be understood in terms of regional rights and

regional claims, rather than only in terms of what national economies can afford, and what national governments may regulate. Trade union membership may also be understood in regional rather than only national terms. Analysing the shifting geometries of power and regionalisation processes may help to foster broader regional alliances and widen the social claims to the region. Regionalism may then not follow the script of globalisation, and lead to counter-hegemonic regional alternatives.

On the ground are the concentrations of newly proletarianised workers at South African multinationals that create a material basis for solidarity amongst workers at these multinationals, in the same way that regional solidarity has emerged in NAFTA. New grassroots movements are emerging such as COLETU (Congress of Lesotho Trade Unions) in Lesotho and the transformation in Botswana of the public service associations into fully-fledged trade unions. High levels of militancy in Zimbabwe and Swaziland are fuelling a working class challenge to the state. Even in Mozambique the mobilisation for a fight for a national wage increase in 2000 suggests a restive working class. These developments should auger well for the emergence of labour organisations that can build co-operation and solidarity work in Southern Africa and foment a counter-hegemonic regional identity. ★

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