What makes a region: establishing analytical dimensions for the application of Neumann's Region-Building Approach

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Introduction

The study of regions, regionalisms and regional phenomenon as a whole have been part of the International Relations study agenda for at least five decades, with its different aspects being addressed from various theoretical perspectives, each adopting a profusion of terms and concepts that, not rarely, fail to dialogue with one another. However, regardless of the approach adopted, whether considering regions as a result of cultural interactions or formed by systemic factors, created by states or resulting from the action of state and non-state actors, the literature seems to omit comments about the processes by which a region arises, especially as regards the political meanings of these processes.

In an article originally published in 1994, Iver B. Neumann sought to contribute to this debate in an attempt to overcome the gap presented by other theoretical perspectives, which he believed did not provide adequate explanations of the construction processes behind the idea of a region. Developing his theoretical framework from the assumptions originally presented by Benedict Anderson (1983) in the book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Neumann argues that regions should be understood as imagined communities, which are preceded by actors who "as part of some political project, see it in their interest to imagine a certain spatial and chronological identity for a region, and to disseminate this imagination to a maximum number of other people" (Neumann, 2003, p. 161). Thus, regions are, above all, cognitive constructs related to political projects, built through actors' discourse.

Although he presents a refreshing vision of regional studies by providing a new understanding of regionalisms, in empirical terms Neumann limits his efforts to understanding Northern Europe, basing his theoretical approach on the challenges imposed by the study of this specific region, not presenting any methodology capable of implementing it in other regions. Likewise, even though Neumann's region-building approach served as the theoretical framework for a good number of empirical studies in the years follow-

ing the publication of his article[1], in general, these also present a severe methodological deficiency, not making clear which discourse was analyzed or, more importantly, within which parameters. This results in research with low replicability, in which the selection of datasets and the parameters of analysis are unclear, leaving room for potential selection based on a confirmation bias.

These shortcomings have already been previously noted by other authors. For instance, Tassinari's (2004) proposal is based on merging Neumann's region-building approach with Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) in order to use the latter theoretical framework to overcome the deficiencies of the former, creating what he calls "the Critical Region Building Approach." To some extent, Tassinari (2004) succeeds in his proposal, but the product of his efforts is limited to studies focusing on regions purely defined in security terms. This article will try and go beyond this.

The final objective of this article is to present a refinement of Neumann's region-building approach theory, which hopefully will facilitate the development of more consistent and clearer methodologies applicable to any region. Specific objectives are:

- to understand on which kind of basis region-building narratives are built;
- to present a set of analytical dimensions to guide the proper study of region-building narratives;
- to suggest a base for methodologies capable of universally applying Neumann's region-building approach.

The research presented here has primarily theoretical nature, using a bibliographic review method to situate itself in the literature about regions as a whole and to suggest advances based on the reflections obtained.

Even though Neumann's region-building approach is the theoretical framework on which this research is based and to which it intends to contribute, it should be emphasized that region-building narratives, the focus of the theory, are not built in a conceptual vacuum, but rather draw on previously established concepts and definitions of what a region is. These are partly constructed by other theories that study regional phenomenon, making their revision vital for the adequate accomplishment of the work proposed here. This paper will be divided into three main sections, with the first one dedicated to analyzing how regions are understood in different theories. This section will begin with a discussion of the models used to organize regional studies in the field of International Relations, focusing on the dichotomous model of "old" and "new" regionalisms, supported by authors such as Fredrik Söderbaum (2003) and Björn Hettne (1994), and the organizational matrix proposed by Fabrizio Tassinari (2004), followed by the analysis of five theoretical groups: Neorealism; Liberal Theories; Globalism; Constructivism; and RSCT. The paper will then return to the matrix drawn by Tassinari (2004), which will guide the development of a literature map, *i.e.*, a visual representation of how each of the theories is situated within a general framework (Cresswell, 2014).

The second section will focus on the region-building approach proposed by Neumann (1994), the central theory of this research. Neumann questions the origins of

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1   For some examples, see: Browning (2003); Keskitalo (2004; 2007); Abdenur and Souza Neto (2014); and Delcour (2015).

regions as a manifest phenomenon, always guided by the same question: "whose region?" In this sense, his approach does not clash with any previous theories, which, in their essence, discuss what elements is the existence of a region based upon, while Neumann's questions are directed at asking "how and why the existence of a given region was postulated in the first place, who perpetuates its existence with what intentions" (Neumann, 2003, p. 162), it is thus a theory focused on region-building narratives, not regions *per se*.

Finally, the third section presents the results of the research, suggesting a theoretical refinement of Neumann's approach based on the presentation of four analytical dimensions to guide the study of region-building narratives. It is argued that with these one is able to clearly seek the answer to the question "whose region?" when applied to empirical cases.

The main theoretical approaches to regional studies

For decades the study of regions has been one of the main subjects addressed by the field of International Relations. As Tassinari (2004, p. 15) points out, concepts such as regionalism, regionalization, regional cooperation, and regional integration have been widely used in theoretical and empirical studies of various forms, which are associated with different theoretical currents[2]. However, these studies lack cohesion between themselves, giving the different mean-

ings of terms associated with the regional phenomenon. As Tassinari (2004, p. 15) himself stated,

> there is not perfect harmony in terms of the manner in which these terms are employed in the different sources. As a result, the attempt to put forward a comprehensive review may easily fall short as a rather sterile struggle focusing on attaching and detaching different labels to different concepts.

The lack of cohesion between the different theoretical approaches that deal with regions also manifests in the form of proposals to organize and group them in categories of analysis. Perhaps the categorization criterion that has been most commonly used is the division between works concerned with the study of 'old' or 'new' regionalisms, but, before presenting the distinctions between these two categories, it is necessary to define the very concept of regionalism. Although it is hard to find a consensus[3], this paper will adopt the definition proposed by Fredrik Söderbaum (2003, p. 7), according to which regionalism "concerns the ideas, identities and ideologies related to a regional project." In this sense, "old regionalisms" refer to studies that began in the 1960s, based on a rationalist view and with the states as the central actors of the analysis. On the other hand, "new regionalisms," which have emerged since the 1990s, challenge the rationalist and state-centrist approach of their predecessors, bringing to the focus of the analysis the actions and thoughts of sub-

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2   Based on the work of Banks (1969), William Thompson (1973) presented a survey of 22 authors, spread across five theoretical perspectives, all associated with the old regionalisms. Today these represent merely a fraction of the existing theoretical universe.

3   Gamble and Payne (2003), for instance, define regionalism as a state-led project, while regionalization refers to a process more related to social spheres.

national actors (Söderbaum, 2003, p. 10). Björn Hettne (1994) provides the most objective view of the distinctions between both theoretical sets:

> Whereas the old regionalism was formed in a bipolar Cold War context, the new is taking shape in a multipolar world order. Whereas the old regionalism was created from outside and "from above" […] the new is a more spontaneous process from within and "from below". […] Whereas the old regionalism was specific with regard to objectives, the new is a more comprehensive, multidimensional process (Hettne, 1994, p. 1-2).

Alternatively, Iver Neumann (1994, p. 53) presents a second proposal to organize studies of regions, arguing that the existing literature could be organized along a continuum, which would present at its ends "theorists concentrated wholly on either internal or external factors" to explain region related phenomena. According to him, "inside-out" approaches typically justify the existence of regions based on cultural similarities and political and social interactions between the groups belonging to the regions, while "outside-in" approaches are focused on systemic aspects, considering geopolitical factors as the main definers of the regional space. Figure 1 presents the basic structure of a regional studies literature map, based on Neumann's proposal.

Figure 1 – The continuum of approaches to regional studies.

| Outside-in	Inside-out
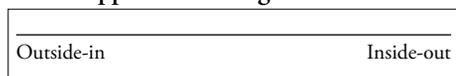
Source: Neumann (1994).

Essentially, the continuum proposed by Neumann focuses exclusively on the levels of analysis addressed by each theory, *i.e.*, categorization is based on considerations that are systemic ("outside-in") or internal to the region ("inside-out"). Although it provides a good starting point for separating and organizing the different theoretical approaches to regional studies, his model is far from free of criticism. Tassinari (2004, p. 17), for example, points out that, if only the one-dimensional model proposed by Neumann is considered, the categorization of studies associated with the neorealist and globalist theories of International Relations would be grouped together at the end of the "outside-in" continuum since, despite the numerous differences and tension points between the two approaches, both see regions as a result of systemic dynamics.

Based on these considerations, Tassinari (2004) suggests adding a second continuum of analysis that observes the nature of the actors considered in each theory. At one of its ends are "top-down" approaches, a classic position in International Relations that considers states as the only relevant actors. At the other end are "bottom-up" approaches, which see a wide variety of sub-national and international actors as relevant for the analysis. Thereby, the model adopted by Tassinari (2004) fuses the sole dimensions of the two models in a single structure: on the one hand, it considers the actors that are central for the analysis, the main element of the dichotomous model that divides regional studies between the "new" and "old" regionalisms; furthermore, the validity of the continuum defended by Neumann (1994; 2003) is maintained, based on the level of analysis observed by each theory.

Combined, the two axes form the matrix presented in Figure 2, which allows a visual presentation of regional studies according to their level of analysis (horizontal axis) and actors considered in the analysis (vertical axis).

Figure 2 – Matrix of theoretical approaches to regional studies.
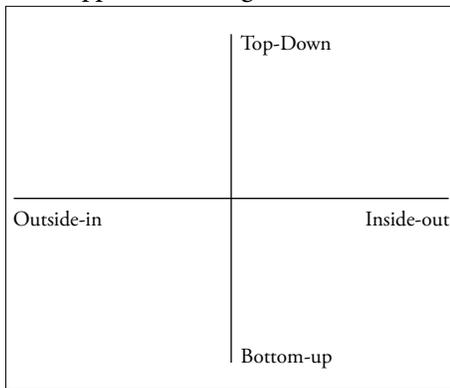
Source: Based on the matrix presented by Tassinari (2004, p. 19).

Following the approach proposed by Tassinari (2004), the positions of the main theoretical currents that address the regional phenomenon in the field of International Relations will now be analyzed, focusing on the understanding of what a region is for each of these currents. Initially, the division between "old" and "new" regionalisms used by authors like Hettne (1994), Söderbaum (2003), and Hurrell (2005) will be adopted. The group understood as being associated with old regionalism will be subdivided into what are traditionally regarded as the two major theoretical currents of International Relations: neorealism and liberal theories. After this, the analysis of new regionalisms will be equally divided into two sections, one on the study of globalism and the second on constructivism. A fifth theory will then be analyzed, the region security complex theory (RSCT), part of the theoretical framework of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies. Although it is conceptually close to studies associated with the old regionalisms, this theory differs from the others due to its unique model, which considers regional phenomenon as a simultaneous result of systemic and internal dynamics to the region itself. For this reason, Neumann (1994; 2003) chose to build his own approach starting with a direct criticism of RSCT, thereby making it appropriate to present this theory last.

Old regionalisms

The term "old regionalisms" generally refers to approaches whose roots go back to the 1960s, dominating the debate about regions until the 1990s. Although it was based on the processes of regionalization that took place after the World War II, especially on the European continent, these approaches cannot be considered outdated or inapplicable to the regionalization processes experienced in the 21st century. In a general sense, these approaches share the same epistemology and basic assumptions, adopting a rationalist and state-centrist posture, focused on a "problem-solving" approach, usually associated with processes of economic integration or security alliances. The two main theoretical currents of International Relations associated with the old regionalisms are neorealism, focused on structural variables and power politics, and liberal theories, whose emphasis is on the role of institutions at the regional level (Söderbaum, 2003, p. 10; Tassinari, 2004, p. 20). The authors and partic-

ularities of each of these theories, especially in terms of actors and the level of analysis they observe, will be discussed below.

Neorealism

As Stephen Walt (1998, p. 31) points out the neorealist theory of International Relations is characterized essentially by the abandonment of explanatory factors associated with humans' bellicose nature — typical of works associated with classical realism, such as those of Hans Morgenthau (1948) — in favor of a perspective focused on power politics among states and the systemic pressures imposed by the international system. Similarly, it is possible to identify differences between classical realism and neorealism with regard to the specific treatment they give to regions and regionalisms as objects of study.

According to Hurrell (1995, p. 46), the classical realistic view treats regional phenomenon as an anomaly, *i.e.*, an unexpected formation that should not be taken into account, whereas the neorealist perspective tends to study regions and, more specifically, regionalisms, similarly to the studies of alliance formation (Hovmand, 2002; Walt, 1987). States therefore engage in regionalization processes through the formation of local alliances, driven by the need to obtain instruments to cope with political and economic external pressures (Tassinari, 2004, p. 20)[4]. The nature of regions in neorealist theory is thus necessarily state-centered and derived from pressures external to the regions.

Furthermore, in relation to the regional studies associated with neorealism, the concept of hegemony also has to be considered, as it has important implications in studies about regional cooperation as a whole. Andrew Hurrell (1995, p. 50-53) argues that hegemonic relations can affect region-building processes in at least four ways:

- regions can be created as a form of reaction of weak states against medium and great powers;
- regions can be constructed as a way of containing and possibly even to co-opt the hegemonic power to be part of a regional cooperative space (such as West Germany in the post-Second World War period);
- the region can be used to subsidize a bandwagoning[5] process between the weaker states and the hegemonic power;
- a decadent hegemonic power can perceive the formation of a region as a way

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4   In view of the principles of neorealist theory as expressed by Mearsheimer (1994, p. 10), although at first glance the relevance of processes of alliance formation in the neorealist theory seems to be a contradiction (and, consequently, the presence of the region-building processes too), considerations about those processes are justified by the very rational and self-centered nature that characterizes states from the neorealist point of view. In the words of Grieco (1988, p. 600), "State rationality means that states possess consistently ordered goals, and that they select strategies with the purpose of achieving these goals in the largest possible measure. Inter-national cooperation involves the voluntary adjustment by states of their policies in such a way as to help each other reach a mutually desired goal." In fact, Mearsheimer (1994, p. 9) himself acknowledges that states often cooperate, but this cooperation always occurs within the limits and constraints established by the logic of security.

5   In the context of International Relations theory, Mearsheimer (2001, p. 162) defines a bandwagoning process as "when a state joins forces with a more powerful opponent," while Waltz (1979, p. 126) — responsible for popularizing the use of the term — defines it as the opposite of balancing behavior. In practical terms, it is a situation in which a weaker state considers that the cost of opposing a stronger state outweighs the benefits of doing so, thereby subjecting itself to the leadership of the hegemonic power at the cost of some of its own interests.

"to pursue its interests, to share burdens, to solve common problems and to generate international support and legitimacy for its policies" (Hurrell, 1995, p. 52).

Liberal theories

Of all the theories analyzed in this literature review, those associated with the liberal current of International Relations are the ones in which the role of regions exerts a more central position in relation to the works associated with the theory as a whole. In fact, Joseph Nye (1988, p. 239) even states that "the major developments in the Liberal tradition of international relations theory in the post-1945 period occurred in studies of regional integration." Within the liberal current, liberal institutionalism and neofunctionalism emerge as the most relevant theories in relation to what is being discussed here.

Regarding liberal institutionalism, described by Söderbaum (2004, p. 21) as the dominant current within the liberal paradigm (at least as far as regional studies are concerned), its posture resembles that of neorealist authors, as it is focused on states, understood as rational and self-centered actors, which always seek to maximize their earnings. In the words of Keohane and Martin (1995, p. 48), "the difference between realism and liberal institutionalism [...] lies in contrasting understandings of why institutions are created and how they exert their effects." Therefore, while neorealist authors argue that institutions are relevant merely as instruments to be used by the great powers in the international arena (Mearsheimer, 1995, p. 86) and that cooperation between states is necessarily limited by a logic of relative gains (Waltz, 1979, p. 105)[6], authors associated with the liberal institutionalist theory believe that institutions promote changes in state expectations, particularly by providing information about the behavior of other actors, ultimately provoking perceptible transformations in states' behavior (Keohane, 1989, p. 10; Keohane; Martin, 1995, p. 43).

This focus on the role of institutions at the international level is reflected in the way these authors approach problems associated with regions, mainly studying them from the perspective of regional cooperation. As summarized by Tassinari (2004, p. 25), "liberal institutionalists argue that states promote the creation of formal and informal institutions in order to facilitate the solution of common problems and to coordinate action." This international cooperation (in this case, regional cooperation) is defined by the establishment of international regimes (Krasner, 1983), aimed at solving specific problems and maximizing the benefits obtainable through cooperation. Therefore, in relation to regional cooperation processes, liberal institutionalism is focused on the internal rather than the systemic variables of the region (as in the case of neorealism).

Moving to neofunctionalism, its main exponent is Ernst Haas (1970), whose works go back to the beginning of the 1960s and are primarily focused on understanding the

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6   Waltz (1979) argues that even in a situation where all parties are achieving absolute gains through cooperation, states should question which one is achieving the highest relative gain, since "one state may use its disproportionate gain to implement a policy intended to damage or destroy the other. [...] the condition of insecurity — at the least, the uncertainty of each about the other's future intentions and actions — works against their cooperation" (Waltz, 1979, p. 105). It is precisely in this sense that Keohane and Martin (1995, p. 43) argue that institutions can change state behavior by providing information that minimizes the uncertain nature of international relations.

regional integration processes[7] existing at that time, especially in Western Europe. Like the neorealist and the liberal institutionalist perspectives, the neofunctionalist view also sees states as the most relevant actors in regional phenomenon, but neofunctionalists also pay some attention to understanding the role of national elites in state behavior. In this sense, Haas defines the study of regional integration processes as follows:

> The study of regional integration is concerned with explaining how and why states cease to be wholly sovereign, how and why they voluntarily mingle, merge and mix with their neighbors so as to lose the factual attributes of sovereignty while acquiring new techniques for resolving conflict between themselves (Haas, 1970, p. 610).

According to the neofunctionalist view expressed by Haas (1970), regional integration emerges from a central group focused on technical issues. For this process to advance, the institutionalization of an autonomous mediator (whether in the form of an individual or a group of experts) is required. This combination between state interests and the mediation of institutions is what Haas (1961, p. 368) calls supranational. Eventually, this process generates the so-called "spillover effect," according to which

> earlier decisions [..] spill over into new functional contexts, involve more and more people, call for more and more inter-bureaucratic contact and consultation, thereby creating their own logic in favor of later decision, meeting [...] the new problems which grow out of the earlier compromises (Haas, 1961, p. 372).

Philippe Schmitter (1969) is perhaps the author who develops this concept in the most complete and clear way, and is even mentioned by Haas (1970) in later works. According to Schmitter (1969), the spillover effect refers to processes in which the members of a particular integration scheme are disproportionately satisfied with the results, and seek to resolve this dissatisfaction by expanding cooperation to another sector (expanding the scope of mutual commitment), through the intensification of their commitment in the initial sector (expanding the level of commitment), or both (Schmitter, 1969, p. 162).

As Tassinari (2004, p. 23) points out, the product of these spillover effects identified by the neofunctionalist view of regional integration is the creation of a feedback loop focused on the actors involved in the integration process, which, through the imbalance in their levels of satisfaction in relation to the regional integration, tend to produce effects involving sectors and actors originally not contemplated by the regional integration project. Therefore, despite maintaining the state-centric logic, Haas' neofunctionalism, as well as liberal institutionalism, departs from systemic explanations in favor of theses empirically guided by the experience of each regional group.

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7   It is important to consider that Haas clearly establishes the distinction between regional integration studies and other studies that focus on regional processes. According to him, "the study of regionalism or regional cooperation or regional organizations furnishes simply materials on important activities of actors or on their beliefs. The study of regional integration is concerned with the outcomes or consequences of such activities in terms of a 'new deal' for the region in question" (Haas, 1970, p. 611). Although focused specifically on regional integration processes, the neofunctionalist view is still relevant for the literature of regional studies as a whole.

New regionalisms

Studies of new regionalisms consist of a set of approaches specifically dedicated to studying the so-called "second wave of regionalisms," initiated in Western Europe in the mid-1980s and afterwards gradually spreading to other parts of the globe. As a process, the second wave of regionalisms differs from the first (initiated after World War II and active until the early 1970s), mainly since they escaped European integration models and evolved into something global and pluralistic in their forms (Söderbaum, 2003, p. 3-4). In the words of Andrew Hurrell (2005, p. 42):

> The new regionalism needs to be understood as a multidimensional and multilevel process, which is not based solely on or around states, but reflects the activities of states, firms and social groups and networks. Regionalism needs to be viewed as taking place within a range of arenas, involving a heterogeneous set of actors, acting both "from above" and "from below" and tying together material factors and ideas and identities.

Moved by these new processes, from the mid-1990s onwards there emerged new approaches to the study of regionalisms. These approaches have few common denominators: in general, they share only the rupture with the rationalist perspectives of theories that preceded them and the belief in the need for a theoretical approach that considered actors other than states. Similar to what was done with the approaches related to the old regionalisms, the main studies on new regionalisms will be detailed below according to the theoretical schools with which they are associated, namely globalism and constructivist approaches.

Globalism

As pointed out by Hurrell (1995, p. 54) and Tassinari (2004, p. 26), the visions expressed by globalist authors are closer to a less systematized worldview than to a proper International Relations theory. Nevertheless, their focus is on the mobility of people, capital, values, and ideas and how this process continually shapes the global arena. Globalist authors see the globalization process[8] in a similar manner to what was described by Al-Rodhan and Stoudmann (2006, p. 3), according to which

> globalization involves economic integration; the transfer of policies across borders; the transmission of knowledge; cultural stability; the reproduction, relations, and discourses of power; it is a global process, a concept, a revolution, and an establishment of the global market free from sociopolitical control.

Among the main concepts of globalism is the idea of "deterritorialization"[9] of space in international relations, *i.e.*, the reorgani-

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8   It is important to emphasize that the terms globalism and globalization are not synonymous. As Joseph Nye (2002) describes, globalism "at its core, seeks to describe and explain nothing more than a world which is characterized by networks of connections that span multi-continental distances. It attempts to understand all the inter-connections of the modern world — and to highlight patterns that underlie (and explain) them. In contrast, globalization refers to the increase or decline in the degree of globalism. It focuses on the forces, the dynamism or speed of these changes."

9   The concept originates in philosophy, having been coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the book *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), and later advanced to other areas of knowledge, such as geography and international relations. Enes and Bicalho (2014, p. 196) provide a simplified definition of the concept: "In the processes of deterritorialization/reterritorialization, the political and cultural dimensions are interwoven. A process of deterritorialization can be both symbolic, with the destruction of symbols, historical landmarks and identities, as well as concrete and material […] by the destruction of old political-economic ties/borders of integration."

zation of international space provoked by the progressive weakening — as perceived by the authors specialized in this area — of the Westphalian state model in the post-Cold War world. In turn, the weakening of borders, formerly held in an absolute manner by the nation-state, paves the way for a series of new interactions between subnational agents, as they *reterritorialize* global space through their relations (Forsberg, 1996).

At first, this process of globalization seems to oppose to the very concept of regions, since it diminishes the theoretical relevance of the regional spaces linked to old regionalisms (led by states and associated with a Westphalian view of sovereignty) and reterritorializes space in a structure that escapes the classic regional model. In this sense, Hurrell (1995, p. 55) even argues that "globalization works against the emergence of regionalism." Octavio Ianni (1999) acknowledges the apparent opposition between the globalist and regionalist perspectives, but suggests a different viewpoint:

> Globalism naturally coexists with several other fundamental configurations of life and thought. Tribalism, nationalism and regionalism, as well as colonialism and imperialism, are still present all over the world. But all these realities acquire other meanings and other dynamisms due to the processes and structures that move global society[10] (Ianni, 1999, p. 7).

In the context of globalism in International Relations, the "other meanings" that regionalisms acquire rest precisely in the process of reterritorialization of global space, which produces a new form of regions. In this context, authors such as Katzenstein (1996) and Held and McGrew (2003) argue that globalization and regionalism are complementary processes, with the former encouraging the latter instead of opposing it. Tassinari (2004) summarizes this as follows:

> The rationale [of globalist authors] coupling globalization and regionalism focuses on the complementarity of the two dynamics. This complementarity is based on a rather physiological and natural readjustment of territory and sovereignty intended to cope efficiently with global challenges (Tassinari, 2004, p. 28).

In these terms, regions are seen as the natural product of deterritorialization and reterritorialization processes in the global arena, formed through the continuous interactions between actors that interact in them. Like neorealism, the globalist view is systemic, and the regional space is determined by the pressures imposed by the international system on human, capital, and information flows. However, with regard to the actors prioritized by this theory, the globalist view directly opposes to the neorealist state-centrism: due to the weakening of the Westphalian model, sub-national actors are largely responsible for the reterritorialization of global space.

Constructivism

The first thing to be said about constructivism is that its definition as a theory of International Relations is somewhat open

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10 Original text: "O globalismo naturalmente convive com várias outras configurações fundamentais de vida e pensamento. O tribalismo, o nacionalismo e o regionalismo, assim como o colonialismo e o imperialismo, continuam presentes em todo o mundo. Mas todas essas realidades adquirem outros significados e outros dinamismos, devido aos processos e às estruturas que movimentam a sociedade global".

to debate. On the one hand, authors such as Walt (1998) and Snyder (2004) tend to group a varied set of approaches under the generic label of "constructivism," treating them as a single large theoretical body composed of several strands that dialogue with one another. On the other hand, authors such as Adler (1997), Tassinari (2004), and Slaughter (2011) define constructivism not as an actual theory, but as an ontology, *i.e.*, "a set of assumptions about the world and human motivation and agency" (Slaughter, 2011, p. 19), or as "a theory of knowledge, an epistemology" (Tassinari, 2004, p. 82). Thus, as presented by Adler (1997, p. 323), "constructivism is not a theory of politics *per se*. Rather, it is a social theory on which constructivist theories of international politics — for example, about war, cooperation and international community — are based."

In this sense, although it is possible to draw features common to all constructivist approaches[11], what can be seen in practical terms is the emergence of a profusion of different approaches with a few basic assumptions in common, which, according to Adler (1997, p. 335-336), can be divided into at least four large groups. The first group are the "modernists," who argue that "once ontological extremism is removed, there is no reason to exclude the use of standard methods alongside interpretative methods." Additionally this group is divided between state-centric constructivists like Wendt (1992; 1999) and authors who treat social participation as an emergent feature of the international system, including authors like Cederman (1996) and Wæver (1995). The second group, represented by authors such as Onuf (1989) and Kratochwil (1989), "uses insights from international law and jurisprudence to show the impact on International Relations of modes of reasoning and persuasion of rule-guided behaviour." The third group identified by Adler is the most heterogeneous, with works agglutinated based on a methodology that "emphasizes narrative knowing." In this group are works focused on gender (Tickner, 1993), social movements (Lynch, 1994), and the development of security interests (Ruggie, 1995; Wæver, 1995)[12]. Finally, the last group identified by Adler brings together authors who turn to genealogical methods of research, typical of postmodernist works (for an example, see Price, 1995).

With regard to regional studies, the main contributions associated with constructivism have been focused on observing the origins and characteristics of social participation in regional phenomenon, with works that resemble those which Adler classifies as non-state-centric modernists (first group) and those focused on security narratives (part of the third group). According to these perspectives, any individual can

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11 Fearon and Wendt (2002, p. 75-76) summarize four characteristics common to all constructivist approaches: "First, constructivism is centrally concerned with the role of ideas in constructing social life. […] Second, constructivism is concerned with showing the socially constructed nature of agents or subjects. […] Third, constructivism is based on a research strategy of methodological holism rather than methodological individualism. […] Finally, what ties the three foregoing points together is a concern with constitutive as opposed to just causal explanations."

12 It is noteworthy that Wæver's article (1995) is classified by Adler (1997) in two different categories. This reinforces the idea that the typology presented by the author must be interpreted in a somewhat loose way, taking these elements more as sets of characteristics that works can incorporate in different degrees than actual classes of constructivism.

actively participate in the construction of a political community, which may manifest in the form of a region (Tassinari, 2004, p. 29). In the words of Hurrell (1995, p. 64),

> constructivist theories focus on regional awareness and regional identity, on the shared sense of belonging to a particular regional community, on what has been called "cognitive regionalism." They stress the extent to which regional cohesion depends on a sustained and durable sense of community based on mutual responsiveness, trust, and high levels of what might be called "cognitive interdependence."

It is noteworthy that this perspective on regional phenomenon resembles some schools of geography, a discipline which, in its own way, has the concept of regions as one of its foundations. As Paasi (1991, p. 240) outlines,

> It [the region] is thus a people-bound category, albeit not necessarily fused with individuals but connected with "communities." This approach emerges partly from the tradition of cultural geography and is partly fused with humanistic geography, which does not comprehend regions as social (scientific) categories but instead points to the role of the cognitions and emotions of average people in the constitution of these spatial units.

In the field of International Relations, the study of regions and regionalisms from a constructivist perspective has mostly developed around the concept of "security communities," coined by Deutsch back in 1957.

In this work, Deutsch (1957) focused on analyzing ten historical cases of regional integration processes, trying to extract lessons that could be applied in the geographical space covered by Western Europe, Canada and the United States. The conclusion is that integration processes depend on a sense of community among the populations of the region that is intended to be integrated, built on a long period of extensive contact between relevant subnational actors (Deutsch, 1957).

Although the concept of security communities was little explored in the years that followed[13], since the 1990s it has been taken up and further developed by a new generation of theorists. Of these, the most prominent are Adler and Barnett (1998), who returned to the concept proposed by Deutsch (1957), redefining security communities as "a transnational region comprised of sovereign states whose people maintain dependable expectations of peaceful change" (Adler; Barnett, 1998, p. 30). While admitting that the definition and specific features of each security community will vary from case to case, Adler and Barnett (1998) define three basic characteristics common to all security communities:

> First, members of a community have shared identities, values, and meanings. [...] Secondly, those in a community have many-sided and direct relations; interaction occurs not indirectly and in only specific and isolated domains, but rather through some form of face-to-face encounter and relations in numerous settings. Thirdly, communities exhibit a reciprocity that expresses some degree of long-term interest and perhaps even altruism (Adler; Barnett, 1998, p. 31).

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13 Nelsen and Stubb (1998, p. 122) point to the rise of neofunctionalism between the late 1950s and the early 1960s as the central reason for the lack of interest in the concepts coined by Deutsch (1957) in the years that followed.

As Tassinari (2004, p. 31) points out, this definition suggests that regions are, in essence, "a discursive practice that may vary according to the meanings granted to them and the contexts in which they are used." Thus, if we consider the three basic characteristics proposed by Adler and Barnett (1998), Australia, for instance, would be part of the Western security community, even though it is not physically located in the West. This is where lies the greatest constructivist contribution to the study of regions: while other authors, including Deutsch (1957), define regions in a strictly geographical form (which generates the additional problem of how to define boundaries between two neighboring regions), constructivists such as Adler and Barnett (1998) expressly disassociate regions — defined as security communities — from the geographic space (Adler; Barnett, 1998, p. 33). In these terms, space becomes merely one instrument, among many, used by the actors in their discursive practices that define the regional space.

Regional security complex theory

Although theoretically limited by its specific focus on security dynamics, Neumann (1994, p. 57) recognizes RSCT as one of the theories whose approach is most complete in relation to the concept of regions. RSCT's relevance to regional studies as a whole derives from its model, focused on patterns of friendship and enmity historically built between the units of a regional system, which allows the simultaneous consideration of systemic factors that impact on regional design (identified by Neumann as the "outside-in" factors) and factors related to the actors' perceptions of each other (the "inside-out" factors). But, despite its great theoretical value — or perhaps precisely because of it —, Neumann chooses to build his contribution to regional studies starting from a direct criticism of RSCT[14].

RSCT is an important part of the theoretical framework that composes the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, which, according to Hendler (2016, p. 16), is based on three main points:

- its analytical method is heavily influenced by constructivist ontology[15], here specifically focused on securitization processes;
- it presents a comprehensive view of the International System, broadening the scope of analysis beyond the military sphere;
- its focus is aimed at the regional level through RSCT, with the latter being particularly relevant in this literature review.

According to its authors, the domestic and global levels of analysis — dominant in security studies until the end of the Cold War — are not appropriate to address the plurality of factors present in international security dynamics. On the one hand, the very concept of "national security" seems to be flawed and unable to establish a real level of analysis *per se*: since security dynamics are necessarily relational, the safety of a given actor cannot be studied in a conceptual vacuum. Consequently, studies that are said to

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14 This critique will be looked at in depth in the next main section, specifically devoted to the analysis of Neumann's Region Building Approach.

15 RSCT is mainly influenced by the works of authors associated with the first and third group of constructivist approaches identified by Adler (1997), with Ole Wæver even being one of the main authors of the Copenhagen School.

focus on aspects of "national security" usually only position a given state as the center of a particular international context, leaving aside a set of relevant dynamics within the context in question. On the other hand, the global level lacks an appropriate integration between its security dynamics, with only the great powers being truly affected by the dynamics of all parts of the globe (Buzan; Wæver, 2003, p. 43).

The central concept of RSCT is that, since most threats are more easily propagated over short distances than over long ones, security interdependence will generally be associated with *regional clusters* — identified by the theory as Regional Security Complexes (RSC) —, characterized by the degree of security interplay being more intense among the actors within them than in relation to actors external to them (Buzan; Wæver, 2003, p. 4). Therefore, "security complexes are regions as seen through the lens of security" (Buzan; Wæver, 2003, p. 43-44).

In these terms, Buzan (1983, p. 106) originally defines a RSC as "a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another," and, in a later work, Buzan, Wæver and Wilde (1998, p. 120) redefine the concept as "a set of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another." As Octavian Milevschi (2012, p. 113) points out, this adjustment to the definition seems to be motivated by changes in the post-Cold War international system, as well as by the post-structuralist and post-state centric shift in international security studies. In fact, in the book *Regions*

and Powers: The Structure of International Security, Buzan and Wæver (2003, p. 44) specifically recognize that the definition of RSCs was reformulated to "shed the state-centric and military-political focus" and to acknowledge "the possibility of different actors and several sectors of security." However, even though this wider framework does not predefine states as the dominant actors, the authors admit that "the world is still largely state-centric, even if our [their] framework is not" (Buzan; Wæver, 2003, p. 44-45), before presenting an interpretation of the international system that is still based on a state-centric world view.

In the same book, Buzan and Wæver (2003, p. 53) also present four elements that compose the basic structure of a RSC, namely:

- the boundaries that separate one RSC from another;
- its anarchic structure, meaning that all RSCs are composed of two or more autonomous units;
- the distribution of power between the units;
- the social construction of the patterns of amity and enmity among those units.

The first three elements are related to what Neumann (2003, p. 162-165) associates with "outside-in" approaches, while the concept of a social construction of the patterns of friendship and enmity between the units is associated with "inside-out" approaches. As has already been mentioned, it is precisely this double anchorage at both ends of the outside-in–inside-out continuum that makes RSCT particularly relevant when studying regional phenomena from a broad theoretical perspective.

However, even if its relevance to this literature review is undeniable, it is impor-

tant to consider that its authors explicitly disassociate the idea of RSCs as directly related to other concepts of regions, denying the idea that these must necessarily correspond to pre-established historical, natural, or cultural boundaries. Thus, RSCs may or may not be understood as regions by other theoretical approaches, but their definition as a RSC is established purely in terms of security dynamics (Buzan; Wæver, 2003, p. 44) and their delimitation, as Neumann (1994, p. 57) puts it, is treated as "a technical question."

Relevant actors and levels of analysis: the map of literature about regions in the field of international relations

As has been shown up to this point, the study of regions and regionalisms is present in various theoretical currents of the International Relations field, which often use similar terms to refer to different phenomena. In this context, the first challenge of this paper is to find a way to organize this theoretical universe in a brief — but understandable — way.

Three organizational approaches were considered at the beginning of this study:

- the division between "old" and "new" regionalisms, common in the literature and used by authors like Fredrik Söderbaum (2003) and Björn Hettne (1994), a model that, to a certain extent, guided the analysis of the first part of this article;
- the division proposed by Iver Neumann (1994), focused on the explanatory factors adopted by each theory, dividing them based on the use of internal or ex-

ternal explanatory factors to the region (inside-out and outside-in approaches, respectively);
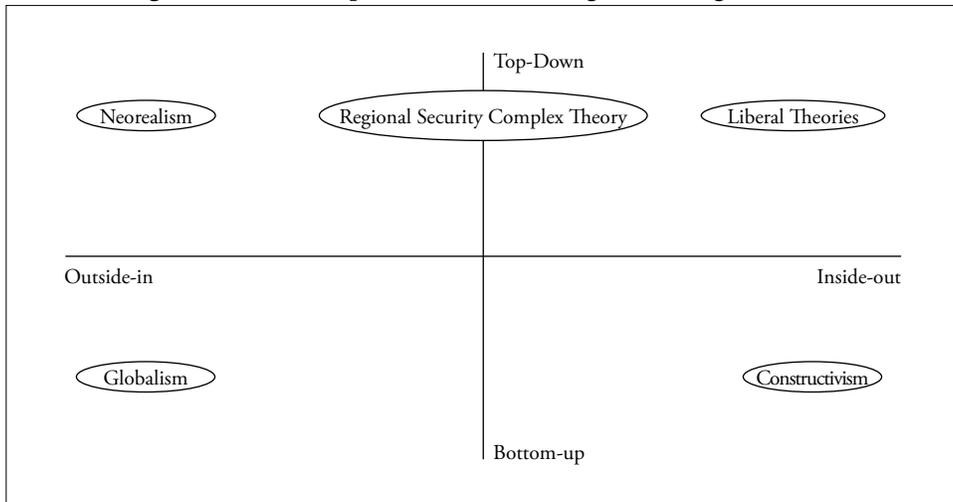- the matrix proposed by Fabrizio Tassinari (2004), which, based on the continuum proposed by Neumann, suggests the addition of a second axis that identifies the type of actors considered relevant by each theory (only states or if subnational actors are included in the analysis), effectively merging Neumann's continuum with the dichotomous model of old/new regionalisms and, thus, resulting in the most complete organizational proposal.

Figure 3 shows the partial map of the literature, based on the matrix proposed by Tassinari (2004) and taking into account the theories analyzed up to the present moment.

This literature map, combined with the literature review carried out above, provides a solid basis to understand how each theoretical current comprehends regional phenomenon and the aspects in which they are more assertive or inadequate. However, in view of the practical aspects of this research, a question remains open: how does a region arise? The answer to this will be now sought in the so-called region-building approach, proposed by Iver Neumann in 1994, which will guide the research from this point forward. Its late presentation is justified by the fact that this approach is based on a direct problematization of what regions are in the other theories analyzed so far, and how those theories fail to question the nature and genesis of those regions.

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16 It should be emphasized that the present model is a simplification of an exceptionally rich theoretical reality. Although in some cases, such as the works associated with neorealism, the model is almost perfect, in others, especially in cases associated with constructivism (which RSCT and Neumann's region building approach can also be associated with), it is expected that there will be works that do not fit in the model defined here.

Figure 3 – Partial map of literature about regions and regionalisms[16]

Top-Down

Neorealism   Regional Security Complex Theory   Liberal Theories

Outside-in   Inside-out

Globalism   Constructivism

Bottom-up

Source: Based on the model proposed by Tassinari (2004).

The region-building approach

In his paper "A Region-Building Approach to Northern Europe," Iver Neumann (1994) argues that the theoretical approaches analyzed so far have the same crucial gap: they all assume the region as something given, that simply exists and has a certain range of specific characteristics, which may vary according to the theoretical tradition to which each approach is associated. In all approaches, "the assumption that the region exists is unchallenged. The nature and *genesis* of regions is treated as a given" (Neumann, 1994, p. 57).

With this in mind, Neumann presents the region-building approach not as an attempt to refute or supplant other approaches to regionalism, but rather as an effort to shed new light on their findings, to go beyond them and, as Tassinari (2004, p. 56) points out, "beneath them." In a later paper, Neumann summa-

rizes precisely the relationship that the region-building approach establishes with the other approaches looked at previously:

> [The] region-building approach is not offered as an attempt to place the study of regions on an entirely new footing. It does not aim to crowd out what are arguably the two dominant approaches in the existing literature: an inside-out approach focusing on cultural integration and an outside-in approach focusing on geopolitics. Rather, it is offered as a perspective from which to dot the margin of the ongoing debate by asking questions about how and why the existence of a given region was postulated in the first place, who perpetuates its existence with what intentions, and how students of regions, by including and excluding certain areas and peoples from a given region, are putting their knowledge at the service of its perpetuation or transformation (Neumann, 2003, p. 162).

Therefore, the main focus of the region-building approach lies in the study of the genealogy of regions — and is thus associated with the fourth group of constructivist authors identified by Adler (1997). In general, Neumann's approach questions the epistemology of the dominant approaches in the field while maintaining the main focus on the ontological origin of the regions. The genealogical nature of his approach is shown above all by the constant question asked by Neumann (1994; 2003), "whose region?" Guided by this question, he seeks to understand the genesis and the basic nature of a region, while the other theories use different analytical lenses to understand the elements of that region. Unlike other theories (including the previously discussed other constructivist approaches), Neumann's region-building approach is not a theory about regions *per se*, but rather a theory about the narratives that construct these regions.

As its name suggests, the region-building approach is to a large extent derived from the literature on nation-building, especially in the understanding of their genealogy based on the idea of nations as "imagined communities," a concept proposed by Benedict Anderson (1983) in the book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. According to Anderson (1983), nations should be understood as imagined communities because:

> [Nations are] imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion […] it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the na-

tion is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings (Anderson, 1983, p. 6-7).

In this sense, Anderson adopts a posture similar to Gellner, seeing nationalism not as a process of self-discovery of a community as a nation, but rather as one that "invents nations where they do not exist" (Gellner, 1964, p. 168). Neumann (2003, p. 160) also recalls that in the process of formulating a political agenda, by an elite whose purpose is to establish a national unity (understood as an imagined community), it is always possible to construct a 'prehistory' for that nation, incorporating it in time and space. This process is done by identifying and, more than that, by giving relevance and meaning to political bonds, cultural similarities and economic links.

In simple terms, the region-building approach essentially proposes that these ideas should be applied not only to nations, but also to regional structures. As Neumann (2003, p. 161) points out:

> It is a largely neglected fact in the literature that regions are also imagined communities. The existence of regions is preceded by the existence of region-builders. They are political actors who, as part of some political project, see it in their interest to imagine a certain spatial and chronological identity for a region, and to disseminate this imagination to a maximum number of other people.

Neumann (1994; 2003), however, admits that nations and regions have obvious differences, in a large part derived from the particularities that each presents in its

constitutive process, especially with regard to the intentions of the actors who act as nation-builders or region-builders. For instance, actors operating as region-builders rarely seem to want the regional space to evolve into a political entity in traditional terms, while this seems to be the basic goal of actors in the position of nation-builders (that is, to create a nation-state). In addition, since they deal with dynamics that by definition transcend state boundaries, region-builders engage with state sovereignty in a differentiated way (Neumann, 1994, p. 58-59; see also: Tassinari, 2004, p. 56).

Thus, what Neumann (1994) proposes is the application of the genealogical approach of nation-building theses in the study of regions. In these terms, the process of region-building can be understood as "a practice, a platform, a meeting place," and, therefore, regions should be understood as "a product of political actors and are created by actor-generated discourses on the region" (Tassinari, 2004, p. 56). In Neumann's words (2003, p. 162):

> Regions, then, are defined in terms of speech acts […]. But instead of postulating a given set of interests that actors are supposed to harbour before their social interaction with other collectives, the region-building approach investigates interests where they are formulated, namely in discourse.

The region-building approach is, thus, not established as a direct criticism of the other theories reviewed in this article, but rather proposes a new ontological vision about the nature of regions — a vision directly related to constructivist ontology. If the other theories are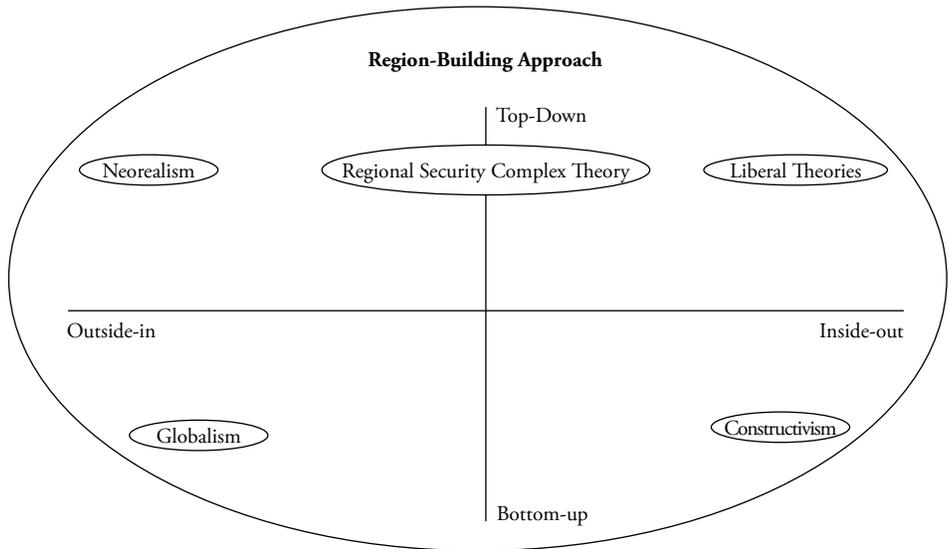 devoted to studying the elements that characterize a region (*i.e.*, *what is* the regional space), the region-building approach seeks to observe how these elements are socially constructed through the analysis of the discourse of their actors — thus, focusing on understanding *how and by whom a certain regional space is built*. Returning to the literature map previously presented, Figure 4 shows its final version, placing the region-building approach outside the matrix proposed by Tassinari (2004).

Its relationship with the other theories is not horizontal, but vertical: since Neumann's region-building approach treats regions as imagined communities built through discourse and positions these region-building narratives as the focus of the approach, any element used in these speech acts becomes relevant to the analysis. Thereby, all theories that analyze these elements shall be considered and understood as valid tools to be used within the region-building approach.

Applying the region-building approach: a theory refinement

Having concluded the bibliographic review, a theory refinement that aims to provide a more systematic and clearer way for the universal application of the region-building approach defended by Neumann (1994; 2003) will now be presented. It is expected that the proposed improvements to the theory, once applied to the creation of methodologies for specific case studies, will allow researchers to trace the genealogy of a region as an imagined community, analyze the degree of convergence between the conceptions of multiple actors in a given territory with regard to its regional nature, and observe the configuration that this region assumes.

Figure 4 – Positioning of the region-building approach on the literature map.

Region-Building Approach

Top-Down

Neorealism   Regional Security Complex Theory   Liberal Theories

Outside-in   Inside-out

Globalism   Constructivism

Bottom-up

Before proceeding, three critical points must be considered in relation to the object of this research: regions. First of all, it is necessary to recall the basic axiom of the region-building approach: regions are imagined communities built through speech acts. In these terms, the proposed methodology must necessarily address the discourse produced by the relevant actors in the region being studied.

Second, as Neumann (1994, p. 53) recalls, regions are constantly evolving, with each member seeking to position itself as the heart of the region through competing narratives. For instance, as Abdenur and Souza Neto (2014, p. 5) point out, considering that the leading states of a regionalization process tend to have their strategic agendas facilitated at the regional level, the region-building process is often driven by power interests. This continuous clash of competing narratives suggests that, ultimately, regions have an amorphous nature. It is thus not possible to determine precisely what is and what does belong or not to a particular region, because the answer varies in time and according to what each actor produces in their discourse. It is only possible to identify the central patterns around which the perceptions shown by the actors revolve, in other words, to identify general patterns in the discourse whose repetition and widespread acceptance over time establish a collectively idealized center for the region.

Third, regions are built on a wide range of elements and through the interactions of various types of actors, with each fragment of this universe being better analyzed by one

of the theories reviewed in the first section of this article. Therefore, a theory refinement that suggests analytical dimensions to the universal application of the region-building approach must be, above all, generalizing and inclusive in order to be able to encompass all the defining elements a region can have, according to how they are understood by the other approaches.

As a result, the first step that any researcher must take in order to apply the region-building approach in a case study is to define exactly which discourse will be part of their research *corpus*, always highlighting the selection criteria and seeking to cover all accessible materials within the established parameters. Usually, this process will require three selections: one related to the actors; one related to the temporal space observed; and one related to the context in which this discourse was produced. The choice of this material shall always be determined by the case being analyzed.

In the case of actors, researchers should pay attention to the type of dynamics that are at the center of the regional project being studied and which actors are leading those dynamics. Generally, these dynamics can be of three types:
- led by states;
- led by non-state actors (usually involving a wide range of actors such as business corporations, civil society and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs);
- mixed, involving both state and non-state actors.

It is important to note that, as expressed by Söderbaum (2003, p. 7), all regionalisms involve state and non-state actors to some degree. In this sense, researchers must pay attention to the dynamics considered central in the region-building project being studied.

Although Neumann's region-building approach undeniably favors its application in empirical studies focused on states, its inclusive nature with regard to the elements by which the regions are conceived (and, consequently, constructed) allows it to also be applied in studies focused on non-state actors, as long as the data necessary for the analysis is available.

In relation to the temporal selection, it must be of such an amplitude that allows the observance of long term changes in the discourse of the selected actors, presenting some significance in its initial and final milestones. Although each selection is specific to the empirical case to which it refers, usually the proper study of a region-building process will require the analysis of discourse produced over decades.

Finally, it is still necessary to present the context in which the discourse was produced, in other words, which representatives and which arenas are considered. For example, in cases where the research adopts a state-centric approach, two main questions must be answered:
- which individuals will be considered as legitimate representatives of each state (for instance, the head of state, the foreign minister and/or diplomats in general);
- in what kind of situations the discourse was produced, such as bilateral meetings or specific summits.

While it is necessary to keep in mind that through the simple act of performing these selection choices the researcher is potentially silencing some narratives and reinforcing others, their implementation and presentation makes the research replicable and ensures that its results are clear in relation to its explanatory limits – two essential

points to overcome the current methodological deficiency in works adopting the region-building approach.

Once the research *corpus* is defined, these materials should be analyzed within certain dimensions, with each one having several categories of analysis. Although the specific method to be used may vary from case to case, depending on the characteristics of the base material and the researcher's methodological choices, these dimensions can be instrumentalized in a direct way when applied to methods that require this type of classification — such as content analysis —, or used to guide the reading of texts in methods that do not necessarily require the establishment of well-defined analytical dimensions — such as discourse analysis[17].

Three of these dimensions are central to any analysis. Their focus is specifically on understanding the design of the region studied through the observation of the discourse of its main actors. These dimensions were derived from the theories analyzed in the bibliographic review presented above. As already mentioned, they seek to be generalizing and inclusive in order to encompass all elements from different theoretical currents as the defining elements of a regional space, which are consequently instrumented in region-building discourse. The established dimensions are:

- Geographic delimitation: refers to the territory that appears in the discourse as the physical dimension of the region. Following Neumann's approach, the geographic delimitation will be seen as a parameter, amongst others, that is used to define regions as imagined communities. Usually there will be a well-defined geographic center, while periphery spaces may have their inclusion in the regional space subject to constant debates between discourses that include or exclude them from the region. Its categories are necessarily established *a posteriori*, since the possibilities of regional design are virtually endless;

- International or transnational political relations in the territory in question: how the actors express themselves in relation to interactions between them in the territory in question, which must necessarily be expressed by them as regional dynamics in their discourse. This does not refer to specific and momentary issues, but to continuous and broad patterns. As demonstrated throughout the literature review, these dynamics can be of the most varied types, involving interactions in the economic, security, environmental and social spheres. Its categories can be defined *a priori* (observing the presence of mentions in certain predefined spheres) or *a posteriori* (derived from the text);

- Collective identity factors: as Wendt (1994, p. 386) points out, collective identification should be understood as a continuum from negative to positive, "from conceiving the other as anathema to the self to conceiving it as an extension of self," arising out of the ability of actors to identify common ground in their social identities[18]. It is based

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17 For more information on the methods of content analysis and discourse analysis, see: Halperin and Heath (2012).

18 The sets of meanings that actors attribute to themselves in relation to their perspective of others. Normally, actors will have multiple social identities that may vary in salience (Wendt, 1994, p. 385).

on these that regions see themselves as imagined communities through the construction of the shared identity of "we" — as members of the region — in opposition to "the others" — those outside. Objectively, these factors concern the rules of inclusion and exclusion, expressed by the actors in their discourse, which define what belongs or not to the region in question. As well as in political relations, collective identity factors can be of various natures, such as cultural, ethnic, historical, political or economic, and its categories can be defined *a priori* (observing the presence or absence of certain pre-defined identity factors in the actors' discourses) or defined *a posteriori* (derived from the text itself).

In addition, one auxiliary dimension should be observed by researchers:
- Direct quotes of other actors: This refers to parts of discourse where an actor refers, generally in a positive way, to the actions of another actor in the potential regional space. These quotes are relevant because they indicate which actors are, at a given moment, recognized by others as relevant in the geographical space in question. Simultaneously, they also attest the capacity of these actors to impact the posture of others to some degree. This dimension differs from the previous ones because it is not related to the way the region is expressed in actors' discourse, serving only to help to understand the region-building process. This data, by itself, is not able to indicate which actors actually operate as region-builders, however, it may provide valuable additional information to enrich inferences about the region-

building process analyzed. Its categories are necessarily established *a posteriori*.

Once the elements expressed in the actors' discourse are properly categorized, the data should be organized and compared, seeking to observe how and by which actors the elements looked for were expressed during the period of time analyzed. Through these procedures, it is expected that the researcher will have collected sufficient evidence to infer whether a region exists or not, the general design of its collectively constructed idealized center, and which actors have actively contributed to its construction by introducing and advocating in favor of its base elements.

Conclusions

One of the major problems when it comes to the study of regions seems to be how to establish what the regional space is. The abundance of theoretical currents that deal with regional processes, with each observing only a part of the whole — but using the same terms and concepts to refer to different aspects of the regional phenomenon — finally results in the production of a subfield of International Relations in which even the creation of a literature map that situates the different theoretical approaches is open to a wide-ranging debate.

Three proposals to organize the literature on regional studies were presented at the beginning of this article:
- the dichotomic model that divides studies between those associated with the "old" or the "new" regionalisms, defended by authors such as Fredrik Söderbaum (2003), which to a certain extent guided the literature review;

- the continuum between "inside-out" and "outside-in" approaches, advocated by Iver Neumann (1994) in the same article in which he presents his region-building approach;
- the matrix proposed by Fabrizio Tassinari (2004), which effectively combines aspects of the two organizational proposals previously mentioned.

Thus, the model proposed by Tassinari (2004) seems to be the most complete one for organizing the regional studies literature — but is still far from perfect. Notably, constructivist approaches present a classification challenge: while works such as Adler and Barnett (1998), focused on the concept of security communities, adopt an *inside-out* and *bottom-up* approach, works such as those derived from the Regional Security Complex Theory — which also embraces the constructivist ontology — present a *top-down* approach doubly anchored in explanatory factors of *inside-out* and *outside-in* nature. In turn, Neumann's approach, although also based on the constructivist ontology, chooses to focus on region-building narratives, not regions themselves, ending up not fitting in any of the observed models, being thus represented in the literature map at an observational point outside the matrix defended by Tassinari (2004).

Even so, considering the dilemmas created by the vastness of existing approaches, the adoption of the concept of imagined communities built through speech acts seems to be an effective and elegant solution to study regions. From this standpoint, all the assumptions of other theories about the regional phenomenon maintain analytical validity by being converted into instruments by which the regions are thought and, consequently, constructed. Moreover, the region-building approach provides a solid theoretical framework for exploring the genealogy of regions, questioning the role and position of each actor in relation to the regional nature of a given space, how the posture of these actors varies over time, the content of the alleged basis of existence for the region and its very *raison d'être*. It is interesting to note that, by focusing on region-building narratives, Neumann's approach does not only allow us to study region-building projects that have been successful (*i.e.*, the ones that were actually able to build an imagined community understood as a region), but also projects that failed to produce the expected results, which suggests the existence of an interesting subfield of research practically unexplored by the existing literature.

However, despite its theoretical advances, in empirical terms Neumann (1994; 2003) limits his examples to Northern Europe, the region he is most familiar with. Therefore, he does not develop in-depth efforts to produce a methodology capable of implementing his approach in any region. In this sense, the present article sought to systematize the region-building approach through the development of four analytical dimensions which, through a generalizing and inclusive logic in relation to the assumptions of other theories of regional phenomenon, allow us to analyze the discourse of any actor and, from this, derive the design of the regional space defended by this actor in their discourse. This article argues that, through the systematic analysis of the discourse of the actors considered relevant in the creation of a regional space, compared over time and guided by these four dimensions, it is possible to safely infer the idealized center of a region and the actors whose discursive action most influenced the creation of this imagined community.

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Abstract

What makes a region: establishing analytical dimensions for the application of neumann's region-building approach

This article proposes some reflections on the theoretical findings of the Region-Building Approach defended by Iver Neumann (1994; 2003), noting that, although its ontological approach is the most adequate to study region-building processes in the field of International Relations, its methodological aspects have been underdeveloped until now. The article uses a bibliographical review to locate itself in the literature on regions as a whole and, from the reflections obtained, suggests advances. A refinement of Neumann's theory is presented, focusing on contributing to the development of more consistent methodologies for research that use it and four analytical dimensions to study regional narratives are suggested. It is argued that, based on the four analytical dimensions proposed, it is possible to safely infer the idealized center of a region and the actors whose discursive action most influenced its creation as an imagined community.

Keywords: Region-Building Approach; Regions; Region Building; Regionalisms; Imagined Communities.

Resumo

O que cria uma região: estabelecendo dimensões analíticas para a aplicação da abordagem de construção regional de neumann

O artigo propõe algumas reflexões sobre os achados teóricos da Abordagem de Construção Regional defendida por Iver Neumann, notando que, embora sua abordagem ontológica seja a mais adequada para estudar processos de construção regional no campo das Relações Internacionais, seus aspectos metodológicos foram pouco desenvolvidos até o momento. O artigo recorre à revisão bibliográfica para se situar na literatura sobre regiões como um todo e, valendo-se

das reflexões obtidas, sugerir avanços. É apresentado um refinamento teórico da abordagem defendida por Neumann, focando em auxiliar o desenvolvimento de metodologias mais consistentes para pesquisas que a apliquem, sugerindo quatro dimensões de análise para estudar narrativas regionais. Defende-se que, utilizando como apoio as quatro dimensões analíticas propostas, é possível inferir com segurança sobre o centro idealizado de uma região e os atores cuja atuação discursiva mais influenciaram na criação dessa comunidade imaginada.

Palavras-chave: Abordagem de Construção Regional; Regiões; Construção Regional; Regionalismos; Comunidades Imaginadas.

Résumé

Qui cree une region: l'etablissement des dimensions analytiques pour l'application de l'approche de construction regionale de neumann

Cet article propose quelques réflexions sur les conclusions théoriques de l'approche de construction régionale défendue par Iver Neumann, en notant que, bien que son approche ontologique soit la plus adéquate pour étudier les processus de construction régionaux dans le domaine des relations internationales, les aspects méthodologiques ont été peu développés jusqu'à présent. On a utilisé la révision bibliographique pour comprendre la littérature sur les régions comme un tout et, à partir des réflexions obtenues, on suggère des avancées. Un raffinement théorique de l'approche préconisée par Neumann est présenté, axé sur l'aide au développement de méthodologies plus cohérentes pour les recherches qui l'appliquent et en suggérant quatre dimensions analytiques pour étudier les récits régionaux. Il est soutenu que, sur la base des quatre dimensions analytiques proposées, on peut inférer en toute sécurité le centre idéalisé d'une région et les acteurs dont l'action discursive a le plus influencé la création de cette communauté imaginée.

Mots-clés: Approche de Construction Régionale; Régions; Construction Régionale; Régionalismes; Communautés Imaginées.