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## **Civil Society and the Quest for Alternative Regionalisms**

### **Research Notes<sup>1</sup>**

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#### **Introduction**

During the last two decades, economic liberalization emphasis on regionalism has been a prime concern for wider sectors of civil society around the world. Over and over, these groups are presented in the mass media as opponents to these policy options. Less has been said about the alternatives they have put forward and how some of these have been incorporated into official policies. In some cases, these initiatives have facilitated a gradual shift from the emphasis on economic liberalization towards development, social cohesion and capacity building (e.g. EU regionalism). Nonetheless, for some of these groups, if regionalism aims to benefit marginalized sectors of society in the Global South, then trade and services liberalization policies need to be abandoned in favor of gender sensitive, community based and environmentally sustainable regionalisms. This position has raised key issues of power and resistance in the international political economy and has stirred heated

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<sup>1</sup> These are research notes that aim to disseminate the research proposal **Alternative Regionalisms in an age of Globalization. The role of Civil Society**, that currently supported by the European Reintegration Grant num. 210316.

debates among scholars, practitioners and members of civil society. To date, few systematic attempts have been done to map these debates and to develop a comparative analysis of them, despite of the relevance that these could have for the long-term sustainability of regionalism. This project aims at contributing to fill this gap.

In so doing, this research stems and advances my previous research findings on gender, trade and democracy while incorporating an active dialogue between civil society and the academia. More specifically, this research is rooted on the interdisciplinary area of *International Political Economy* (IPE) and focuses on exploring trade, gender *and* democratic/non-democratic regional governance interrelations. Accordingly, this research aims to display some of the ways in which trade/services liberalization, gender inequalities *and the lack of citizen participation* (particularly of elderly, poor, disable and indigenous women) are inextricably related at regional level.

Furthermore, this research brings together three sets of literature to explore civil society's groups proposals on "alternative regionalisms": a) critical development studies analyses on the politics of alternative development (Escobar & Harcourt, Nederveen Pieterse)<sup>2</sup>; b) feminist economics analyses on alternative/diverse political economies and communities (Gibson-Graham, Harcourt, Peterson)<sup>3</sup>; and c) critical approaches to regional studies and global governance within IPE (Marchand, Boas & Shaw 1999; Rai 2004; Fulong and Olin Wright).<sup>4</sup> Since its inception regional studies (formerly known as area studies) and development studies were interlinked in various ways (Hettne, Inotai, & Sunkel).<sup>5</sup> This project continues and advances this interdisciplinary dialogue.

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<sup>2</sup> Escobar, Arturo and Wendy Harcourt (2005) *Women and Politics of Place*. Kumarian Press; Nederveen Pieterse, Jan (2005) *Global inequality: bringing politics back in*, in Craig Calhoun, Chris Rojek and Bryan Turner (eds), *Handbook of Sociology*. London, Sage.

<sup>3</sup> Gibson-Graham, J. K. (1996). *The end of capitalism (as we knew it). A feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press; Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2006). *A post-capitalist Politics*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press; Harcourt, Wendy, ed. (1994). *Feminist perspectives on sustainable development*. London: Zed Books; Peterson, S. V. (2003). *A Critical Rewriting of Global Political Economy. Integrating reproductive, productive and virtual economies*. London, Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> Marchand, M.H., Morten Boas, Timothy M Shaw (1999) *The political economy of new regionalisms*, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 20, num. 5/ October, 897-910; Marchand, M.H. (1994). *Gender and new regionalism in Latin America: inclusion/exclusion*. *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 63-76; Rai, Shirin (2004) *Gendering Global Governance*. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 6, num.4, 579-601; Fung, Archon and Wright, Erik Olin (2001). *Governance Deepening Democracy: Innovations in Empowered Participatory*. *Politics Society*, vol.29, num. 5, pp. 5-41.

<sup>5</sup> Hettne, Björn, et. al. (1999). *Globalization and the New Regionalism*. St. Martin Press/UNU WIDER.

## Regional context

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in the study of Latin American transnational activism opposing trade and services liberalization emphasis in regionalism (Dominguez, Grugel, Saguier).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, feminist and gender IPE scholars have been committed to building up policy-relevant alternatives to trade and services liberalization by incorporating civil society actors' diverse experiences and proposals. A central outcome of my post-doctoral research has been an initial assessment of what both sets of literature have addressed as the explicit implications of trade and services liberalization for gender relations and for gender-sensitive development.<sup>7</sup> In so doing, my research detected few explicit references on the nature of these implications under conditions of non-consolidated democratic transitions, which to date characterize regions and sub-regions in the global South. Moreover, I have also detected that IPE and regional studies has yet to contribute to systematize and disseminate civil society specific proposals on regionalism that can potentially contribute to inform the governance and overall functioning of the global economy and to the elimination of gender and other social cleavages. Precisely, civil society accumulated knowledges and experiences opposing trade and services liberation in Latin American regionalism not only show us that *more attention is needed to their specific proposals* but also to how these proposals are deeply linked to *notions of empowered participatory regionalism*. To contribute in this twofold direction, this project promotes intersectoral dialogue on regionalisms between civic activism and academia.

More specifically, this study aims to develop a systematic and comparative analysis of a) **the specific proposals** put forward as alternatives to overcome socio-economic deficits embedded in contemporary regionalisms (which are the proposals?); and b) **the practices of governance** that are emerging and are proposed for the implementation of these alternatives (how are these proposals been practiced/enacted?). In particular, the research explores the

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6 Domínguez, E. (2002). Continental transnational activism and women workers' networks within NAFTA, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 4(2): 216-39; Grugel, Jean (2006). Regionalist Governance and Transnational Collective Governance in Latin America, *Economy and Society*, vol. 35, num. 2, 209-31; Saguier, M. I. (2004). "Convergence in the Making: Transnational Civil Society and the Free Trade Area of the Americas." CSGR Working Paper 137/4.

7 Icaza Garza, Rosalba (2007). Engendering while Democratizing. Civil Society and the Politics of Global Trade in Mexico. Paper presented at the International Studies Association Conference, Chicago, USA, March.

specific initiatives put forward as alternatives to three significant examples of North-South regionalism: the European Union New Strategic Partnership for Latin America and the Caribbean (EU-LAC), the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA); and the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America/NAFTA plus (SPP/NAFTA plus). Furthermore, the project examines both, the specific initiatives and the actual practices of governance of different civil society organizations that incorporate local, national, hemispheric, and transatlantic scopes of activism in which gender is a central or transversal category in the design of their proposals for alternative regionalisms.

## **Methodology**

This project's methodology stems from critical approaches to IPE and more specifically from gender theories/methodologies to the global economy. Accordingly, it looks at regionalism through a wider societal dimension and not only from its economic or power politics point of view. Accordingly, it departs from assuming that multiple policy levels and social forces are at stake in the making and re-making of regionalisms and that this poses significant methodological and epistemological problems for the purposes of identifying 'specific' contributions of civil society actors. For that reason, this research starts by identifying some significant actors and structural forces and suggests some of the ways that these have been causally significant to each other under the particular conjuncture of increased regionalization of governance. As such, this approach provides levels or 'entries' of analysis for a complex theme such as alternative regionalisms.

Moreover, this perspective is complemented with a particular analytical distinction that I have started to apply to my own post-doctoral research in order to grasp the democratizing potentials of women groups on global trade politics. In particular, I have differentiated conditions of increased de-politicization, oppression, gender violence and social atomization where women collective interventions are taking place (*the context*) from the very *nature* of those interventions. In short, this perspective contends that if we want to understand the possibilities that these interventions hold for a re-politicization and re-socialization of the global/regional economy, then these cannot be adequately understood just as a renegade offspring of neo-liberal or patriarchal globalization. This consideration helps us to better

understand to what extent civil society cross border interventions have (or not) opened the possibility for the configuration of politics of alternative development (i.e. participatory, “non-capitalist”, subaltern) at multiple policy levels, being the region the main focus of this research.

Furthermore, the work will be conducted by working closely with civil society organizations that participate in and/or contest mainstream regional institutions and processes. Workshops with activist and interviews, semi-structured and informal, would be important to producing the analysis. At this point, it is important to stress the relevance that civil society women practitioners have for this project as producers of alternative knowledges. Accordingly, this project does not intend to be a top-down academic assessment on women collective agency, but an effort to facilitate spaces of self reflection and critical engagement on how regionalisms have been and could be (re)shaped into gender sensitive and socially sustainable initiatives.

The specific objectives of this research previously described (a and b) follow this method and to accomplish the first one, I will develop a systematic mapping of key proposals put forward by civil society groups in Latin America as ‘alternatives’ to mainstream agendas on regionalism promoted by official sub-regional and multilateral institutions (e.g. INTAL, IADB, WTO, EU). In particular, the research focuses on:

- 1) Federación de Mujeres Campesinas de Tarija (**Mujeres**) work on community ownership of natural resources in relation to the FTAA;
- 2) the Hemispheric Social Alliance (**HSA**) Women Committee’s work on performance requirements on short-term capital inflows in relation to the FTAA and the EU-LAC;
- 3) the transatlantic network **Enlazando Alternativas** work on EU TNCs performance requirements in Latin American countries; and
- 4) the Mexican Advocacy Network On Free Trade (**RMALC**) work on public access to traditional knowledge and non-reciprocal treatment status between unequal partners in tri-lateral negotiations in relation to SPP/NAFTA plus initiatives.

Initially, the mapping of alternatives will be conducted by reading the materials and the literature on regionalism produced by these organizations. Later on, this activity will be

complemented with the planned interviews and workshops. During my post-doctoral research, I conducted an initial mapping which showed that three of the most contentious proposals include:

1. the public (community) ownership of natural resources,
2. the non-reciprocal treatment status between unequal partners in bi-lateral and multilateral negotiations, and
3. performance requirements and controls on short-term capital inflows.

In many cases, these proposals have been assessed with economic and technical criteria that rarely problematize to what extent they are or not contributing to challenge the governance and functioning of the global economy. Furthermore, these analyses don't problematize the conditions of non-consolidated and deficient national democratic systems in which these proposals have been put forward. This first objective (a) incorporates these two aspects, which to date have remained poorly interrelated. Here lays a crucial contribution of this project, it recognizes and values civil society accumulated knowledges and its potential contributions to advance more democratic, gender sensitive and environmentally sustainable regional governance.

As for the second objective (b), it provides analytical and empirical tools to identify how besides highly institutionalised forms of regional governance (e.g. free trade institutions, free trade agreements) actual practices are also unfolding from civil society interventions (e.g. counter-summits, tribunals, mobilizations and protests). In these interventions, levels of subsidiarity in decision-making have (or have not) been successfully promoted aiming at contesting mainstream regionalism agendas in the EU, the FTAA and the SSP/NAFTA plus

More specifically, I will conduct an institutional level analysis of the official mechanisms created in the EU, FTAA and SPP to "bring in" civil society into policy decision-making such as the FTAA Committee of Government Representatives on the Participation of Civil Society, EU-Civil Society Consultations Process and NAFTA's Labor and Environmental Commissions. At this point, the analysis will focus on the structure, functioning, and discourses of these mechanisms. To accomplish this, I will capitalize from my postdoctoral research findings on the mechanisms of regional governance that escape from wider public

scrutiny in significant examples of North-South trade interactions. Furthermore, this research will also analyze actual practices of regional governance practices as these are enacted through transnational advocacy campaigns, social forums and mobilizations such as Enlazando Alternativas, Foro Social de las Americas, and within the World Social Forum Process. The workshops and fieldwork trips to Latin America are planned to this end. Interviews will be conducted with Mujeres, HSA, Alternativas and RMALC's activists involved in campaigns on alternative regionalisms.

### **Contributions**

It is expected that this research will contribute to the ongoing debates around the role that civil society plays and should play to advance more participative, inclusive and sustainable global governance, but with a focus on regionalization (the material process) and regionalism (the political dimension). The project originality and innovative character lays on the proposed contributions to advance the state of art of regional studies within IPE such as:

- a) A contribution to bring together the literature on the politics of alternative development, feminist economics and critical regional studies within IPE for the analysis of civil society proposals on regionalism
- b) An updated and comparative analysis of civil society concrete practices of regional governance in relation to EU and US regionalism in Latin America.
- c) A methodological contribution based upon action-oriented research that promotes intersectoral exchanges between civil society and the academic sector in Europe and Latin America.

The originality and innovativeness of this planned contributions rest upon the discussion and reflection that these will trigger on the development paradigms that inform civil society alternatives to trade/services liberalization in regionalism, but also on how civil society's regional governance practices are re-shaping and contesting those paradigms. In so doing, this research will provide a more informed and systematic analysis of civil society groups' alternatives to economic liberalization in regionalism and the debate surrounding them.

As for the originality and innovative nature of the methodological contribution (c), this research puts in practice an action-oriented methodology that has as main focus of enquiry civil society groups and networks. At the same time, this research keeps an overall critical stand when looking into their concrete practices of governance by asking to what extent these are conducted (or not) on the basis of a principle of subsidiarity. In addition to this, the research provides new interview and documentary material collected during the workshops that I have helped to co-organize with civil society activists in Latin America. It is expected that I will continue with these workshops during this project. These events constitute the point of departure in the design of the methodology and research objectives in which civil society actors are taken as producers of knowledges. This was already detected in my previous research, which recognized and valued local knowledge. With this project, I aim to go one step further in this direction while promoting intersectoral dialogue and exchanges between European and Latin American activists and academics.

Finally, this project will contribute to foster a scientific area as IPE by incorporating development studies and feminist economics perspectives into the study of regionalism, but most importantly it will address issues of wider societal relevance such as the urgent need to enhance gender-sensitive, participatory and environmentally sustainable approaches in policy decision-making at micro and macro regional level.