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Fringe Regionalism
When Peripheries Become Regions

Frank Mattheis · Luca Raineri
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Pour Gaia
– F.M.

Preface

Peripheries and borderlands might sometimes be difficult to access, especially when located in deserts, mountain ranges or forests. Nonetheless, they are not devoid of cross-border activities and identities. Once we began to delve into what happens at the margins of the political maps that are so carefully drawn and celebrated by nation states, we quickly discovered quite the opposite. Over the past years, our respective doctoral and postdoctoral fieldwork had brought us to the Sahara, the Caucasus, the Congo Basin and the borderlands around the Iguazu waterfalls. We found places where people are actively constructing transnational regions, either in opposition or in complicity with state actors. Not only did the formal interstate regional organisations not have a monopoly over how a region should look and operate; in the peripheries, regional space was apparently shaped by a very different set of dynamics and actors.

Two of us (Luca Raineri and Alessandra Russo) had already uncovered striking similarities in our work and were looking for ways to make broader sense of this phenomenon. In 2016, we convened a small workshop entitled "Decentred Practices of Regionality" as part of the European Workshops in International Studies in Tübingen (Germany). Here, Frank Mattheis completed the triumvirate. Soon after the workshop, the idea of a joint publication took shape and, due to the richness of the cases and the depth of our theoretical debates, it became obvious that the most appropriate format would be a co-authored monograph. After successfully pitching the idea to our publisher, the to-ing and fro-ing of the writing process began, accompanied by several professional milestones, including vivas, more fieldwork in remote areas, and new academic positions.

Special thanks go to our language editor Angelina Zontine for her superb work in improving consistency and style. All three of us also have great appreciation for all the colleagues who participated in our workshop or commented on various parts of our research at one stage or another. We hope that our readers will include both those interested in empirically rooted stories starring borderlands and those seeking inspiration to overcome state-centrism and Eurocentrism in the study of regionalism.

Brussels, Belgium — Frank Mattheis
Pisa, Italy — Luca Raineri
Bordeaux, France — Alessandra Russo

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Abbreviations

AMU	Arab-Maghreb Union
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb
AU	African Union
CEMOC	Comité d'état-major opérationnel conjoint
CEN-SAD	Community of Sahel-Saharan States
CFA	Financial Cooperation in Central Africa
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
COBERM	Confidence Building Early Response Mechanism
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
CUS	Commonwealth of Unrecognised States
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ENI	European Neighbourhood Instrument
EU	European Union
EUMM	European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia
GUAM	Organisation for Democratic and Economic Development
IR	International Relations
JNIM	Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali
MUJAO	Movement for Oneness of Jihad in West Africa
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Area
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NRA	New Regionalism Approach
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe

UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
US	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

CHAPTER 1

Introductory Remarks: The Case for Fringe Regionalism

Abstract Mattheis, Raineri and Russo present the main rationale of their book on fringe regionalism and explain the need for scientific concepts that can be applied to seemingly marginal regions. The authors emphasise that agency and space in state peripheries have been largely overlooked by the literature on regionalisms. The concept of fringe regionalism turns the focus upside down to instead look at how a marginal position can be a key feature, constituting the centre of its own region.

Keywords Introduction • Margins

The way we perceive and label a territorial fringe depends on the way we construe its position and purpose. As Italo Calvino (1978) wrote with respect to cities: *"Despina can be reached in two ways: by ship or by camel. The city displays one face to the traveller arriving overland and a different one to him who arrives by sea. […] Each city receives its form from the desert it opposes; and so the camel driver and the sailor see Despina, a border city between two deserts".*

The study of regions and regionalisms has continuously been mainstreamed into the field of international studies over the past decades, but the increase in knowledge production has not led to a correction of the threefold bias that has characterised much of the work on regions and regionalisms: the focus on states as drivers, regional organisations as locus,

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and formal projects as embodiment. According to this perspective, places such as Despina are transferred to the margins of regions and scholars tend to overlook the way they actually occupy the centre of their own regions.

As regional organisations have proliferated across the globe over the past three decades, the study of region-making has focused excessively on intergovernmental negotiations and their plans to configure and reconfigure a region delineated by the exclusionary amalgamation of pre-defined nation-states. Theoretical and conceptual tools have been developed accordingly to explain and understand formal top-down regional organisations, while empirical cases tend to be heavily biased towards state-centric entities such as political unions, common markets and multilateral treaties.

This book responds to the need for scientific concepts to study marginal regions as well as the need to decentre the study of regions by focusing on seemingly marginal spaces. By looking at the way regions are imagined, practiced and negotiated rather that centrally planned, the concept of fringe regionalism touches base with economic, political, and social realities outside of the realm of formal regional organisations. We argue that regionalisms emanating outside of national capitals are not necessarily marginalised political, economic or social spaces. On the contrary, their position at the fringes of formal constructions such as nation states, regional organisations or jurisdictions enable these borderlands to establish their own economic, social and political realities. Fringe regionalism, therefore, turns the focus upside down to emphasise how a site's marginal position can be a key feature in its constituting the centre of its own region. Cross-border metropolitanisation affects not only regions with a historic claim to configurations that precede imperial or colonial ruptures; new regions are also produced through practices that take advantage of their position in a contested or marginal setting.

The introduction of the concept of fringe regionalism provides an analytical tool for identifying alternative expressions of region-making the emergence of which is not guided by formal state authorities. Rather, the region is built on the cross-border practices of non-state actors, informal institutions rooted in states' peripheries and alternative, overlapping sources of legitimacy and identity. This book thus aims to decentre regionalism by studying allegedly marginal spaces and actors.

We argue that regions can indeed be found where one would least expect them, as a pluralist ontology allows us to observe alternative dynamics of region-making: not through the explicit deliberations of

rational agents, whether ideational or formalised on paper, but through practices; not in state capitals, but in state peripheries, conventionally portrayed as areas of dis-connections and separation. In other words, fringe regionalism puts the emphasis on forms of agency and spatiality in region-making which are largely overlooked by the literature on regionalisms.

In order to grasp these alternative forms of agency and spatiality, we draw on a conceptualisation of statehood that rejects reductionist "punctualization" (Callon 1991), whether political or geographical, by virtue of which complex entities and networks are shoehorned into fictitious, unitary state actors. In contrast to this view, we suggest that states are innervated by complex networks of patronage politics in which the formal and the informal, the state and the non-state, the legal and the extra-legal, overlap and intertwine. Dropping the rather fanciful assumption that states are monolithic entities akin to individual persons paves the way for transcending the sort of rigid dichotomies that are common in the disciplinary field of International Relations (IR) and makes it possible to observe the complex entanglements between different degrees of statehood (rather than a clear-cut distinction between state and non-state) and the multiplicity of centres. At the same time, drawing on concepts – such as patronage politics – borrowed from post-colonial and African studies (Bach and Gazibo 2012) contributes to addressing the oft-noted eurocentric bias of regionalism literature (Hurrell 2007; Telò et al. 2016; Acharya 2016) while contributing to our overall de-centralising thrust.

The second chapter of this book reflects on the origins of these conceptual biases. It highlights the inadequate treatment of agency and space in regional studies and suggests that important shifts in the field of IR, such as the spatial and practice turns (Middell and Naumann 2010; Adler-Nissen 2013), require us to refurbish the toolkit used for studying regionalism. This argument is supported by a discussion of concepts and perspectives from various disciplines in social sciences mobilised to stress the regionalising potential of the spatial practices taking place in connective borderlands (Korf and Raeymaekers 2013). The delineation and analysis of the practices of region-building therefore occupies a central place in this chapter in that it presents an analytical perspective aimed at overcoming crucial shortcomings.

The third chapter uses fringe regionalism as a lens to highlight the central role of margins in the production of regions. To this end, two main cases are presented and studied in depth: the Sahara and the Caucasus. These spaces provide a quintessential embodiment of the kind of marginal

spaces conventionally framed as areas of limited interaction and circumscribed state engagement. As such, they contradict most of the features of mainstream regional thinking and provide a sort of hard test for our hypothesis. The chapter is divided into three subsections to cover the gamut of dynamics that are constitutive of fringe regionalism. The first subsection focuses on regions as practiced authorities by looking at the way the power relations that emerge between political actors have shaped the fragmenting and bordering of the regional space. The second subsection focuses on regions as practiced economies by looking at patterns of informal economic intercourse at the regional scale as a consequence of the area's positioning as a marginal borderland. These patterns resonate in the physicality of fringe regionalism, for instance in markets and infrastructures. The last subsection focuses on regions as practiced identities by looking at how the region is imagined and legitimised in terms of narratives and identity. Regional identity is constructed through the overlapping of multiple, other points of belonging which, in contrast to the binary practice of nationality, allows for a variety of degrees of intensity.

Finally, the fourth chapter concludes our contribution by wrapping up the results of the theoretical discussion and empirical analysis, and by discussing the wider relevance of fringe regionalism as a concept. In addition to a comparison of our two main cases, we offer suggestions as to how this concept might meaningfully be transferred to other cases as illustrated by Central Africa and the Triple Border between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. This exercise also allows us to outline differentiations within the category of fringe regionalism.

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CHAPTER 2

Producing Regional Spaces from the Margins: Fringe Regionalism: A Conceptual Proposal to Recalibrate the Study of Regions

Abstract Mattheis, Raineri and Russo interrogate the main international studies approaches to borderlands and regionalisms. In this chapter, they argue that the field suffers from a theoretical and empirical bias that prevents scholars from explaining the role that borderlands are playing in terms of region-building. Their chapter identifies the relevant theoretical shortcomings in concepts of borders, space and regions in the main currents of international studies literature. These shortcomings have led to a preoccupation with regionalism, characterised by states as its main driver, by regional organisations as its main locus, and by formal projects as its embodiment.

Keywords Regionalism • Space • Borders • International relations theory • State-centrism • Practices • Geopolitics

This chapter interrogates the main international studies approaches to borderlands and regionalisms in order to argue that the field suffers from a theoretical and empirical bias that prevents it from adequately capturing and explaining the role that borderlands play in terms of region-building. In so doing it makes reference to a broad interest in these blind spots on political maps, a line of inquiry that intersects with current debates in critical geopolitics and post-colonial literature. The chapter identifies the relevant theoretical shortcomings in concepts of borders, space and regions

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in the main streams of literature in international studies. These gaps have led to a preoccupation with regionalism, characterised by states as its main driver, by regional organisations as its main locus, and by formal projects as its embodiment. The chapter also identifies a major empirical limit in the literature, namely the fact that the bulk of studies reproduces delineations that are predetermined by the aforementioned actors, chiefly intergovernmental organisations, thereby neglecting alternative patterns of agency, state-making, and region-building.

2.1 The Obsession with Formal Institutions and Territorial Delineations: A Critique of the Spatial Bias in Regionalism

As regional organisations have proliferated across the globe, scholars have repeatedly considered the making of regional space to consist of intergovernmental negotiations and the establishment of institutions with states for members. Theoretical and conceptual tools have accordingly been developed to explain and understand formal top-down regional organisations, while empirical cases have been heavily biased towards state-centric entities of political unions, common markets and multilateral treaties. We argue that these space and agency biases have become entrenched in the academic discipline over time.

Despite the richness of approaches to regional integration during the Cold War, a common ontological basis for the study of regions produced common flaws. The main across-the-board theoretical limitation in theories of regional integration has been the tendency to a reductionist ontology of spaces and agency. This tendency has resulted in exacerbated dichotomies with epistemological, normative and empirical dimensions that are pertinent for the notion of fringe regionalism, inter alia contemporary vs. past regionalisms, European vs. non-European regionalism and formal vs. informal regionalism.

Given their focus on dynamics beyond the state, the topics of regionalism and regional integration per se may seem at odds with the basic assumptions found in state-centric International Relations (IR) theories. In the main streams of (neo) realism, liberal institutionalism and constructivism, the primacy of nation states as basic actors remains unquestioned and states are conceived as units that can be studied in isolation.[1] The

[1] For a more extensive discussion, cf. Behr 2010.

main theoretical approaches have been torn between their subject and the grand IR epistemologies, resulting in ambivalent characteristics and concepts.[2]

The academic interest in regionalism can be traced to the 1940s and the discipline of political science. As World War II moulded Europe, idealistic perspectives on a post-nationalist future emerged. Federalist and functionalist thinking occupied a niche in the landscape of international relations theory that was dominated by realist visions of states in international anarchy (Morgenthau 1948; Herz 1950).[3] The two approaches initially engaged in prescriptive tasks focused on how to re-invent Europe based on rational assumptions. Their main disagreement lay in the necessary shape and preconditions of the emerging integration process in Europe. Academic debates accompanied the evolution of European integration, but they also produced new theoretical approaches and concepts. New streams were developed such as Intergovernmentalism and Neofunctionalism that proposed competing explanations of the emergence of regional institutions (Rosamond 2000). Nonetheless, until approximately 1989 they all adhered to a common ontological agreement about how to deal with interdependence between a distinct set of nation-states and the centralisation of political capabilities beyond national governments.

Representing two initial perspectives on regional integration, federalism and functionalism can be considered efforts to escape neorealist thinking despite the fact that they failed to free themselves from the main logic of neorealism. In other words, while federalism and functionalism were triggered by an interest in thinking beyond the Westphalian framework of IR, they remain implicitly anchored in methodological nationalism. Federalists pursue a concept of Europe that consists of various layers. According to this view, regions have a strong territorial element and thus overlap with nation states, whereas the specific rules and competencies of regions are separable from those of states. Federalism paves the way for an idea – although a heavily institutionalised one – of regional space, but federations were still thought to consist of territorially-defined states. Functionalism also suggests a kind of spatiality that is not *a priori* territorial. The space of integration is even framed as apolitical, as it occurs

[2] For a more detailed version of the analysis of knowledge production related to regionalism, cf. Mattheis 2014.

[3] Realism proclaimed the understanding that power was the dominant national interest of states as it was necessary to ensure security and the survival in the anarchical system.

outside specific states and could extend to occupy an interconnected global level. At the same time, however, nation states are still the only entities vested with actual sovereignty and, consequently, a regional space could hardly be anything more than an arena lacking in actorness.[4]

The notion of states as separable, closed containers has been reinforced in neofunctionalism. In this view, the nation state is defined as the main and undisputed stage of conflicts and their resolution.[5] The concept of spillover anticipates a kind of superstate, and thus the region as such can hardly be considered a space of its own. In turn, intergovernmentalist and neorealist theories have sought to explain regional integration with reference to the sovereignty and interests of nation states. Intergovernmentalism is a fairly static model that does not take into account a number of dynamic elements such as flows, confidence or regional leadership aspirations. Neorealism is quite explicit in deriving regions from state behaviour, which in this approach is cast as unfolding in a context of international anarchy. Relations between states are thought to be generally prone to conflict, and states are therefore less likely to cooperate with each other. Hence, regional integration is an exceptional development that only occurs under specific geopolitical conditions or power constellations (Grieco 1990). In general, then, neorealist scholars associate regionalism with the interests of a hegemon and consequently deprive regions of spatiality (Hurrell 1995).

Empirical shifts further highlighted the essential Euro-centric bias of regionalism theories. Over the course of the 1970s, European integration in the form of the European Economic Community entered a period of stagnation when certain nationalist governments and the central European administration reached a stalemate. Against this background, scholarly concepts lost their contemporary relevance. Regional organisations in the South failed in their main rationale, that of delivering economic development, and academic interest in advancing integration theory faded as a result. Many scholars abandoned integration theories, concerned that they would lose their main empirical case and conceptual source and, thus, their raison d'être.[6] Integration theory was, at best,

[4] Actorness refers to the capacity to actively take part in international politics and be recognised as such by others (cf. Mattheis and Wunderlich 2017).

[5] This issue has been thoroughly argued by Niemann (2000).

[6] Even during the blossoming of integration studies, Ernst Haas had referred to federalism, neofunctionalism and transaction analysis as "pretheories" (1970).

degraded to a subcategory within other theories such as interdependence (Keohane and Nye 1972).

The lack of theoretical attention after the waning of the first generation of integration theories did not prevent European integration from effectively coming back to life in the mid-1980s. The 1986 Single European Act and 1991 Treaty of Maastricht represented significant integrative steps that scholars had not anticipated. These developments resuscitated academic interest in integration theory, with concepts from neo-functionalism once again applied to the European case and institutionalists viewing this greater degree of integration as a confirmation of their earlier hypotheses (Keohane and Hoffmann 1991).

In the same period, new regional projects emerged and re-emerged between states in most other parts of the world.[7] Although they initially received less attention, over time a wider range of International Relations scholars came to display interest in explaining these processes.

Far-reaching and rapid changes in the empirical world called for new theoretical developments capable of coping with emerging and changing regional schemes. Concepts such as regionalism, region building, regional security complex and regionalisation were proposed to complement or even replace the then-prevailing idiom of regional integration.[8]

Beyond etymological change, new and revised theories also offered ontological and epistemological change (Söderbaum 2016). They dealt with a transformed and expanded subject and linked up with new paradigmatic debates on the transformation of the nation state and globalisation.[9]

Many scholars have revised, advanced and combined previous theories (e.g. economic integration) while others have come up with new approaches, such as the New Regionalism Approach (NRA). The field further fragmented into a number of partially isolated sub-disciplines – e.g. European Union (EU) Studies and Area Studies – with divergent

[7] While regional projects in the development world, such as Mercosur, were particularly acclaimed, notable efforts also occurred in other regions, such as the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA).

[8] These terms were not necessarily new. For instance, *regionalism* had already been applied in previous works (Nye 1968). However, it is from the early 1990s onwards that it is became widely used and an extended debate broke out around its definition.

[9] For theories explaining regional integration with reference to internal structures and actors, the ontological turn was only limited to the expansion of cases. Unlike most other theories, the qualitative division between past and present regional projects was less relevant from this perspective.

epistemologies and ontologies producing a plethora of approaches for studying regions and understanding them. Despite a great deal of conceptual and empirical advancement, however, this field continues to suffer from shortcomings with respect to the category of space and agency.

The notion that regional integration is chiefly a result of structures and actors inside the region remains central to the second generation of theories. For the bulk of regionalism theories, regions are seen as equal to institutions, with supranational elements that represent the expression of the interests of powerful states. Universalist approaches treat regionalism as a process of overcoming nation states, but such approaches depend in the first place on the existence of nation states and inter-state cooperation. According to these approaches, so-called failed states are not considered suitable for building regions, as that regional space accordingly consists of a vacuum that will be filled by other actors (Milliken 2003). The notion of regional space does not imply a spatial scale; rather, it corresponds to an agglomeration of nation states understood as basic units and, as such, numerous fragmentations and peripheries within states are generally overlooked (cf. Frank 1967). It is thus difficult to grasp the dynamics of region-building in borderlands using such frames. Scholars have granted little attention to the way in which the different levels relate to each other, such as the way transnational entanglements produce different localities or the detaching of a territory from an established nation or region undermines existing regionalisms.

Some constructivists and NRA scholars have challenged this notion by arguing that there are no absolute or given regions. Despite the growing popularity of such claims, empirical research continues to focus on interstate organisations,[10] with many scholars thus treating the term regionalism as synonymous with regional organisations and visible institutionalisation. The initial NRA definition of regionalism (cf. Hettne and Inotai 1994) has become a victim of its own success, its significance eroded by an excessively broad use of the term to apply to any kind of institutional set-up.[11]

The interregionalism and comparative regionalism subfields find themselves coming face-to-face with the challenge of conceptual shortcomings

[10] Material on regional organisations is indeed much easier to access than data on informal networks. In addition, the edited series and journals in this field are oriented towards research on well-known and easily identifiable organisations.

[11] Hettne (2005) has critiqued the increasing fuzziness of the term and called for scholars to move beyond it.

in relation to space due to the nature of their object of study, but certain issues have nonetheless never been truly subjected to thorough debate.

In comparative regionalism, scholars have made significant efforts to work outside pre-defined containers. For analytical purposes, in principle, regional spaces would not be predefined but rather delineated according to question or topic that is being compared. Nevertheless, only a few works seriously challenge the convenient practice of relying on spaces that are either formally established by regional organisations and treaties (cf. Fawcett and Hurrell 1995) or tangible in terms of framed statistics (cf. Baldwin and Low 2009).

Conversely, the applied notion of interregionalism and regionalism in the South has followed the dualistic epistemology of the nation state, since this epistemology has been prevalent in IR theories. The region is not understood as a space but as yet another pre-given container the inside of which can be clearly separated from the outside.

Regionalism as an analytical framework divides the phenomenon of integration into three different levels (Söderbaum 2003). The first concerns the historical experiences and common challenges of a geographically outlined region, the second deals with the economic, political and socio-cultural relations that constitute a distinguishable region in contrast with the rest of the world, and the third comprises the impact of regional institutions. Instead of concentrating solely on the nation state, the NRA embraced a broader and more complex ontology that extended to also include all the private and public actors that exist beyond those levels. In line with constructivist proposals, scholars granted particular attention to the way regions were socially constructed by the various actors involved. The notion that a region represents the sum of sovereign states was expressly rejected in favour of a flexible and dynamic understanding and reinterpretation of this object (Hettne 2003). Notions of "shadow regionalism", "trans-state regionalism", "micro-regionalism" and "networked regionalism"[12] were introduced more than one decade ago to account for

[12] Although from the perspective of our arguments there are clear common elements shared among these terms, this fact should not be taken as a negation of the definitional distinction between them. For instance, Bach has underlined the difference between "trans-state regionalism" and "shadow regionalism": the latter is "associated with violence and emergence of entrepreneurs of insecurity", while the former does not necessarily imply the criminalisation of cross-border transactions or the presence of regional "ungoverned spaces" (Bach 2016: 74).

the existence of alternative providers of regionhood[13] that sustain different patterns and processes of regional interaction. These terms draw attention to the way that non-state-centric instances of regionalism may emerge as an alternative to state-led regionalism (Hettne 2005: 557).[14]

The NRA has been influential in various academic disciplines thanks mainly to the success of three specific dichotomies. The first of these is the differentiation between regionalisation and regionalism as ordering categories. The first term, regionalisation, is defined as an informal process led by state and, above all, private transnational actors whose interactions contribute to the creation of a region (Bøas et al. 2003). This implies a phenomenon of spatial compression that is thought to be empirically tangible. In contrast, regionalism has been associated with the strategies and paradigms underlying the process of formalised region-building fostered by states (Hettne and Söderbaum 2002). The NRA has lived up to its name by mainly focusing its analyses on regionalisms, but it seems to have done so reluctantly. Indeed, conceptual works have long displayed a bias in favour of considering regionalisation the more relevant and genuine process in need of particular academic attention (Schulz et al. 2001). The desire to clearly set this approach apart from conventional theories required scholars to shift the spotlight away from state actors. This dichotomy has established itself as pivotal within various academic disciplines, usually deployed to emphasise a distinction between top-down and bottom-up process of region-shaping.

The second success of the NRA lays in its establishing regions outside of Europe as a proper field of research, a shift in focus which also stems from widespread dissatisfaction with the geographic bias found in many conventional theories. At the same time, this shift was fuelled by IR's general interest in a changing world order and regions as subsystems of the latter. The NRA aims to distinguish itself from the dominant focus on EU integration and thus establish itself as an important lens for regional projects outside of Europe. As a result, it has been of particular interest to scholars interested in these projects from the inside.

[13] "Regionhood" has been defined as what distinguishes a region from a non-region, while "regionality" can be interpreted as the specific texture of a region, what distinguishes one region from anther, and "regionness" seeks to measure the density of that texture (Van Langenhove 2003).

[14] See for example: Bach 1999, 2003; Breslin and Hook 2002; Söderbaum 2005, 2012; Lauby 2011.

The third success of the NRA is the a posteriori categorisation of regional integration projects that unfolded during the Cold War as "old regionalisms" (Hettne 1999). This dichotomy is based on portraying such projects as protectionist state-centric organisations focusing on a single policy field, whereas new regionalisms encompass a notion of multidimensional globally oriented projects carried out by a variety of actors.

As the NRA gained influence in the field, these dichotomies have been repeatedly debated and partially revised in order to maintain a dialogue with sub-disciplines such as European Studies. As will be outlined in the next section, the idea of fringe regionalism takes inspiration from all three core elements of the NRA while at the same time blurring the dichotomies to introduce a distinct perspective of its own. The cases presented here are non-European, but the concept of fringe regionalism can also be applied to Europe. And while fringe regionalisms are often ephemeral phenomena, they do also reflect a longer history of failed attempts to produce regions.

Debates around regionalism also gave rise to the concept of regionness as a way of measuring and comparing regionalisms without reproducing the benchmark of economic integration as a path towards a common market. From this perspective, acquiring regionness is a process whereby a region emerges as an acting subject with its own distinct identity, capability, legitimacy and decision-making structure by enhancing institutional and regional cohesion (Hettne 2003; Hettne and Söderbaum 2002). Institutionalisation is thus a central component of regional actorness, ranging from informal to supranational institutions (Doidge 2014). In light of this point, regionness resembles the idea of an autonomous regional community (Hurrell 1995). This debate culminates in the concept of regional actorship, a summary term to describe a region's ability to influence the external world (Hettne 2011).

Although the idea of fringe regionalism embraces the notion of regionness to grasp actorness beyond the nation state, it does not envisage a hierarchy in institutional terms. Instead of focusing on the agency of supra-state entities, such as constituted regions, it emphasises the plural agencies emerging – often in a practical and informal way – below, beyond, aside and sometimes against the state, and their potential to constitute regions. Fringe regionalism thus retains a certain antagonism vis-à-vis formal intergovernmental organisations, rather than constituting a constitutive step towards them.

More recent literature has emphasised the way regions have effectively become important instruments and even actors in their own right in negotiating spatial configurations and globalisation processes (Engel and Middell 2010; Mattheis and Wunderlich 2017). In reality, regions do not replace nations as dominant arrangements for establishing control and sovereignty; the relationship between them is not characterised by a zero-sum game.[15] Rather than "pooling" national sovereignty in the sense of handing it over to a supranational entity, in most cases regionalisms are likely to offer arenas for commonly handling national and other sovereignties, including regional ones. Instead of simply switching from national to regional scales, participating actors combine these scales into a complex entanglement that serves to extend their spatial strategies. The regional level is embedded into a larger process of "jeux d'échelles" (Revel 1996) in which protagonists resort to varying and overlapping scales to express their thoughts and actions. Such an understanding starkly contrasts with approaches that reduce regionalism to negotiation between states, the relocation of sovereignty or hegemonic projects. As such, it provides a basis for conceptualising fringe regionalism.

The spatial aspect of fringe regionalism is also informed by the understanding of de- and re-territorialising in the context of globalisation (Brenner 2004). As argued above, space as a category of its own has been marginalised in the grand debates in IR. This shortcoming also applies to other theories explicitly dealing with regions. Although it has not been overtly neglected, space is reduced to an exogenous and rigid given, an independent variable. This notion also applies to theoretical approaches that are concerned with the phenomenon of regional integration. The most prevalent unit of analysis is the nation state, with the spatiality of this unit treated as given and, thus, deemed of negligible importance (Agnew 1994; Brenner et al. 2008). Regional space is essentially referred to as a stage for states to perform on, but the events that occur are not thought to change the fixed, ahistorical stage itself (Niemann 2000). The spatial turn in other areas of the social sciences (Warf and Arias 2008), often with reference to Lefebvre (1974), have had a limited effect on the study of regionalisms. Integration theory struggles to detach itself from state-centrism in IR theory and begin conceiving regions as spaces of their own.

[15] According to a common understanding of regional organisations, their task "is not to protect their member's sovereignty, but to overcome it, to transform the members into a more unified whole in which nation-statehood is left behind in the interest of creating a new and larger political entity" (Haas 1990: 157).

In our approach, territories are neither fixed nor natural; this does not, however, undermine their relevance for the spatial configuration of political organisation (Agnew 2005; Paasi 2011). The act of demarcating and establishing boundaries continues to constitute the dominant expression of sovereignty. And while the renewed salience of boundaries as spaces of contestation and demarcation increasingly calls into question the utopian/dystopian anticipation of a borderless world brought about by accelerated globalisation, fringe regionalism provides an analytical tool to investigate how the state differential embodied by boundaries can also contribute to strengthening regional dynamics from the peripheries. Accordingly, fringe regionalisms do not necessarily replace existing political and social spaces. Superposition and coexistence are very likely[16] and, just as with any other space, regions are likely to disappear or become significantly altered as their actors and larger structures change over time.

Understanding fringe regionalisms as a particular pattern of global order requires an ontology of the regional that does not simply reproduce national and international imperatives on a different scale (Rosenau 1997; Behr 2008). Shaw et al. (2011) have proposed that regionalisms be categorised into macro, meso and micro levels. This categorisation is mainly based on territorial expansion, however, and thus contains several shortcomings such as a fixation on size, with the result that regionalisms must fit into conventional regions and it is difficult to make out the way fringes act to produce regional spaces.

Fringe regionalism is not congruent with territory or sovereignty and may vary substantially according to the issues at stake. The concept of fringe regionalism needs to be able to deal with blurred shapes, especially when regions come into existence through informal modes of governance or the work of non-state actors (cf. Rice 2012; Lubbock 2018). It needs to allow for a region to consist of superposing scales, each representing a different regionalism. Such superposition could then be read either in terms of core regions or in terms of regional junctures. The former perspective focuses on the points at which regionalisms act in concordance while the latter emphasises how competing imaginaries are negotiated.

The underlying understanding of a fringe region is conceived in reference to a space that typically extends across different nation-states. Such spaces can be initiated by regionalisms and thus by default involve state

[16] For Niemann (2000), the global system is conceivable as a *mille-feuille* characterised by the combination of many inseparable, individual layers forming a larger entity.

and non-state actors that decide to establish forms of cooperation. The production of a region becomes tangible through the cultural and social practices that accompany goods, ideas and people, and these processes complement each other as states seek to control such flows and are pushed by their societies to act within a region (Hurrell 2007). It is also possible, however, for regions to remain solely discursive expressions.

The *raison d'être* for most academic exercises in this field derives from the assumption that regions do exist, in a material sense, and that they host processes of integration. The creation of a regional organisation carries with it a host of misleading expectations, often exemplified by the effects of a common market or a single currency. And yet, the assumption that regionalisms necessarily produce regions does not hold up empirically. Indeed, the proliferation of regional organisations since the end of the Cold War has been facilitated by the fact that an increasing number of these entities only exist on paper; they have no impact on actual integration (Gray 2018). Fostering economic or political regions is a valid motivation for the creation of a regional organisation, but in practice such arguments tend to end up representing an undisputed rationale. In light of these points, regionalism needs to be understood as one of the "different knowledge orders in the production of space" (Engel and Nugent 2010).

In conclusion, fringe regionalisms emerge at two critical junctures within regional spaces. Firstly, they denote the translation between the overarching structures of regional possibilities and the practices enacted by regional actors in borderlands. Secondly, they occupy a key role in representations of regional space in the sense that they embody the counter-imaginaries deployed in opposition to the prevailing conception of space imposed by regional organisations. Acting as junctures, fringe regionalisms open up arenas for negotiation processes involving reciprocal relations between spatial practices, imaginaries and social modes, serving as a means of appropriation for creating, shaping and dominating regional spaces from the margins.

2.2 The Place and Practice of Region-Building

Most of the studies focusing on regional systems, trajectories of region-building, regionally-scaled structures and regionally-confined processes have dedicated disproportionate attention to formal, state-led organisations, often identifying them as the foundational units of analysis. The

conceptual framework of fringe regionalism offers the theoretical tools to circumvent state-centric conceptions of regions and recognize the significance of alternative sources and forms of agency endowed with regionalising potential.

The NRA made the pioneering move of acknowledging that the increasing multidimensionality and multilayeredness of regionalism can only be captured by moving "beyond binary conceptualisations […] such as formal versus informal regionalism, regionalism versus regionalization and state versus non-state actors" (Söderbaum 2016: 32). Outlining a slightly different theoretical take on this question, Daniel Bach (2016: 7) emphasised that "the end of the systematic assimilation of regionalism to regional integration, the focus on non-state actors, the ideational dimension of regionalisms and the multi-scalar and diverse nature of regionalisation processes cast into the limelight issues and areas that never caught the eye of regional integration studies". In particular, the idea of cross-border regionalism is based precisely on the ability of some categories of people (i.e. diaspora, migrants, traders and border residents) to "transact across territories and borders" thus impacting on the production of regional spaces (Bach 2016: 73). Research on regional orders and complexes has thus already questioned the idea that "going regional" is the exclusive prerogative of the state, asserting instead that states are neither the only regionalising actors nor the only places where decisions to go regional are made.

More recently, another strand of literature has emerged, mainly focussed on "international practices" (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Bueger and Gadinger 2014), which offers studies of international and transnational regions the potential to capture those instances of regionality that are not necessarily enshrined by formal institutions, enacted by state actors or included in official policy-making chains.

The concept of practice itself is certainly not new, being indebted in particular to Bourdieu's theoretical legacy. In Bourdieu's terms, practices are deployed within a field, which in turn is determined by the object(s) of contention around which relevant actors, rules and capitals are arrayed. In a field of practices, the norms, forms of competition and games that regulate access to the specific prize at stake are not necessarily spelt out; they are enacted, but those enacting them to do not automatically reflect on what they are doing. As such, they can draw on a tacit, un-thematised knowledge actors implicitly endorse through practices. As a consequence, a field is not demarcated by formalised institutions but often rests on

socially accepted rules of conduct. While aiming to understand power within a field, then, the consideration of formal juridical models or central decision-making is of little significance, since "power is exerted at the level of inarticulate knowledge: meanings are imposed in and through practice" (Pouliot 2010: 46). Rather, the analytical focus should shift to the "infinitesimal mechanisms" through which real power is actually exerted in practice, at the micro-level: "the everyday influences that affect people in their daily lives", as Foucault (1980: 99) famously observed. According to this perspective, "practices" can be defined as the social actions and lived experiences of agents that reproduce or change the existing structures of the field, shaping the experiences of the actors and forming their habitus (Bueger and Gadinger 2014). Located halfway between structures and agents, practices have been defined as both "open-ended, spatially-temporally dispersed nexus of doings and sayings" (Schatzki 2012: 14) and "stable and structured clusters of behaviours, communicative actions and accompanying mental and bodily activities" (Polyakov 2012: 221).

Firstly, to the extent that they draw on collectively shared social meanings, practices have been interpreted as performative enactments that serve to establish collective subjects: for example, following the "community of practices" approach, communities are defined according to what they do and understood as being formed by what they do; since such communities are clustered around actions, they "cut across state-boundaries and mediate between states, individuals, and human agency, on one hand, and social structures and systems, on the other" (Adler 2005: 17).

Secondly, practices have been conceptualised as consisting of routinised and iterable patterns of behaviour, regularised over time and organised according to background, implicit or tacit knowledge, that is, the intuitive know-how that guides behaviour in a given context (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Bueger 2014). When it comes to outlining international practices, however, it is essential that scholars engage in stringent methodological individualism. The purpose of such caution is to empirically scrutinise the process whereby certain performances produce effects of a world-political nature (Bueger and Gadinger 2014).

International practices are thus socially meaningful and socially organised actions, recognised as such in given contexts, the appraisal of which is carried out using standards that are similar among given groups of people (Adler and Pouliot 2011). Such theoretical endeavours and conceptualisations may provide new lenses for reasoning about the dynamics of governance, understood in this case as the practice of governing, thereby shifting

the focus from institutional structures and actors to practices. In concrete terms, we can trace international practices as contingent alignments between practitioners (Pouliot 2010: 1). In other words, international practices include a diverse array of practical activities and experienced, everyday procedures that are performed and enacted by the actors who – in their very different positions and roles – variously operate in transnational fields (including diplomats, brokers, traders, bureaucrats, activists, terrorists, criminals, pirates, smugglers, etc.). These positions and roles enable them to shape and mould a certain social order and exert an impact on regional and global politics.

Beside and beyond international practices, the conceptual trajectory of "practice theory" may also touch on the field of regionalism, offering the kind of new stimuli and conceptual reforms regionalist research agendas seem to require.

There are as yet very few ethnographies of regional organisations, but they share a focus on collecting the practices that can be observed within regional institutions or regionally institutionalised structures and processes, often performed by the professionals and officials therein. In other words, this emerging body of work does not eliminate the prevailing focus on institutional and regulatory aspects, as the main focus of region-making remains the intergovernmental organisation and its institutional characteristics.

A "practical" interpretation of regions rests on the idea that "regions in world politics are constituted by sets of specific ways of doing things – practices – that create more or less ordered spaces and narratives of regional interaction" (Pouliot 2012: 210). Although regionally-scaled practices are "patterned gestures" based on a reciprocally understandable logic, the fact of their existence does not translate into regional orders. "Regional configurations are comprised of competing ways of doing things" (Pouliot 2012: 210), so the interactions that make up practiced regions are mutually intelligible but can also be contested.

Through a practical interpretation of regions, Pouliot tries to reconcile and even transcend the classical "geography versus identity" divide that is so emblematic of ongoing debates on the ontology of regionalism: whereas one strand of literature holds that a region is characterised through its spatial and material dimensions (interdependence and proximity), according to the other strand regionness is anchored in cognitive and normative dimensions and the sphere of identity. By combining material and ideal, structural and agential features, instead, practiced regions simultaneously

account for both axes, overcoming the separation of determinants and causing them to converge into a single process that "generate[s] socially meaningful and organised patterns of action at the regional level" (Pouliot 2012: 217). Building on Pouliot, we similarly aim to study the way "regional practices constitute spaces and narratives of regionness" (Pouliot 2012: 217). Even in the absence of institutionalised, formalised and codified structures (namely, regional organisations), social interactions can be structured at the regional level through and by practices. Rather than being centralised and state-led, such practices represent a connective tissue leading communities and groupings to cluster around a set of behaviours, enactments, and deeds.

Examining the constitutive practices of regions and the way they structure the spaces and discourses of interactions carries the field of regionalism to new frontiers.

First of all, this approach has the potential to emancipate agents from the limitations of systemic or structural explanations that are caught up with the categories of classical geopolitics, state-centrism and institutionalism. Although Pouliot admits that "geographic features rarely speak for themselves in bounding regions", he nonetheless specifies that geography does matter in defining regions where mountains, oceans or deserts perform a naturally disjunctive role. Our endeavour lies precisely in dispelling this last remnant of geographical determinism by showing that practices of cross-bordering and trans-bordering may be constitutive of specific regions. In other words, one of our research objectives is to understand the extent to which "regions' boundaries are determined by the practices that constitute regions" (Pouliot 2012: 219–220).

Secondly, a "practiced regions" approach, that is, one that addresses regions as featuring a "distinct repertoire of action whose prevalence distinguishes a number of regional settings from others" (Pouliot 2012: 220), emancipates the analytical lens from regional organisations and regionally-scaled trajectories of institution-building, objects of enquiry that render regions little more than geopolitical containers for bureaucracies with an international mandate. As this approach reveals, the practices constituting a certain region may be not encapsulated in a set of intentional policies or included in a region-building project.

Accordingly, a practical interpretation of regions may improve our understanding of how actual social interactions differ from the formal mandate of agents and their performance as carriers of practices. Further, the study of "practiced regions" paves the way for appreciating encounters

between agents and a given set of structural constraints. Such an appreciation is particularly significant when certain practices recur as devices of resistance, contestation and emancipation practiced by actors despite the fact that, in a regional context, such practices are once again predominantly directed towards the-nation state as the centre of attention.

According to this perspective, the analysis of practices may allow us to study the possible decoupling between the (structurally defined) rules governing a certain regional order and the ways this order is actually shaped by agents who do not necessarily abide by the norms and formal institutions officially in place. Furthermore, analysing practices that take shape along the peripheries – for example, unstructured and informal patterns of economic and social behaviour rooted in local contexts – offers a de-centred approach to the regionalising potential of borderlands.[17]

2.3 Of Buffers and Frontiers: Informal Agency from the Margins

This section aims to inject theoretical stimuli from critical geopolitics into the manifold acquis of regionalism in order to begin building the conceptual scaffolding of fringe regionalism. Such an approach aimed at subverting the idea of regions as "backdrops, containers or locations" (Söderbaum 2018: 34) embedded in pre-given sets of spaces and scales and contesting the limited regionalising potential of peripheral agents defined by their geographical, social and political remoteness and marginality. To this end, our analysis focuses in particular on peripheral spaces and highlights their centrality for fringe regionalism.

Boundary-straddling areas have often been conceptualised as either zones of competition or zones of indifference and weak interactions. Mountains and deserts in particular are commonly labelled natural barriers, thereby inevitably cast in the disjunctive role of "buffers" and "insulators" between distinct states and regional security complexes (Buzan and Waever 2003). Buffer areas have been represented as spaces of disconnection, on the assumption that a supposedly material and objective obstacle to the movement and circulation of peoples, goods, and ideas entails negative isolation in terms of trade and positive isolation from a strategic-military perspective. Building on this widely held view, scholars from different disciplines (Jones 1981; Cacciari 1994; Diamond 1997) have

[17] For a discussion of this point, see for example Mezzadra and Neilson 2013.

gone as far as contending that the existence of natural barriers has played a crucial role in fostering the territorial fragmentation of Europe, and the latter, in turn, would contribute to explaining European advancement and state-building processes.

In keeping with common sense, the ancestors of geopolitics – informed by positivistic approaches to the discipline – tended to deterministically interpret specific geographical settings or environments as natural loci bound to perform functions of physical, functional and representational separation, on one hand, or of connection, on the other. As a result, classical geopolitical thought has often assumed a division of labour between the (essentialised concepts of) "land" and "sea" (from Mackinder 1904 to Spykman 1944 and Schmitt 1997 [1942]). On one hand, scholars have generally interpreted seas as intrinsically and naturally conveying interactional dynamics. Beginning with the first representations of the Mediterranean as the emblem of inter-civilisational exchange, this tendency has been especially marked in relation to small seas as opposed to large expanses of water and oceans, which both realists (Mearsheimer 2001) and post-structuralists (Farinelli 2009) agree perform a separating function instead.[18] This view seems to date back to an old *topos* of political thought, nicely expressed by Hegel in a much-celebrated passage of his Philosophy of Right: "The sea is the greatest means of *communication*, and trade by sea creates commercial *connections*. […] Rivers are not natural boundaries of separation, which is what they have been accounted to be in modern times. On the contrary, it is truer to say that they, and the sea likewise, *link men together*" (Hegel 1991 [1821], par. 247, emphasis added). It is not by chance that contemporary studies identify the kind of integration occurring among littoral states as one of the classical forms of regional integration: trans-regional integrated spaces such as the Union for the Mediterranean, the Baltic-Black Seas Region, the Black-Caspian Seas or the Caribbean Community have fostered narratives of interconnectedness embedding divergent actors in shared complexes.

On the other hand, mountains and deserts have often been narrated and governed as obstacles to human interactions and flows of goods, ideas and people. Hence, these harsh landscapes have been depicted as representing natural buffers against the contagion of security threats of all sorts.

[18] Bicchi (2018) has recently attempted a reconstruction of the diverse conceptualisations of the Mediterranean "region", conceding that across time the Mediterranean Sea has been seen as preforming the opposite functions of connectors or insulator depending on changing circumstances.

Totalitarian leaders' obsessions with the "natural bastions" of mountain ridges during the Second World War, including the Alps in the case of Mussolini and Caucasus in the case of Stalin, represent cases in point. From this perspective, landmasses might possibly provide for integrating and connecting patterns only to the extent to which they could be considered tantamount to "oceans of earth". This view is embedded, for instance, in the classical geopolitical narratives of the frontiers of the United States of America (US) and Russia expanding across smooth and fertile prairies. In the former case, Turner (1921) consolidated an idea which can be traced back to Tocqueville's (2000 [1835]) study of American political institutions; in the latter case, Solovev's insights nourished what went on to become a *topos* of the geopolitical literature (see Bassin 1993).

By conceptualising fringe regionalism, we call into question these century-old assumptions. The third chapter of the book focuses specifically on mountains and deserts to present a different conceptualisation of both buffer zones and the places conventionally depicted as spaces of disconnection or geopolitical insulators. By reassessing the political value of marginal and peripheral spaces and borderlands usually seen as unsuitable for supporting interactional dynamics, we can thus contribute to studying the patterns of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation (Tuathail 1998) characterising regional security complexes.

To this end, our investigation builds on an epistemological framework which rejects the supposed "objectivity" of the spatial datum posited by geographic determinism and possibilism. Against the grain of classical geopolitical thinking, which shares with IR realism "a materialist vision of the world, one in which human agency can at best adapt to the necessities of nature and power but not fundamentally alter them" (Guzzini 2013: 29), our research issues an invitation to consider spaces and territories not as natural givens but as social constructs influenced by discourses and practices. We argue that discourses, practices and social relations are not exogenous to the space in which they are deployed (as also Hall 2012 observed); rather, they contribute to constituting it. The opposite is also true: social relations are shaped by the space in which they are deployed (Paasi 1996). Hence, we suggest that space be viewed as endogenous to the social realm and not as an empty, passive repository of the latter, since social dynamics do not happen "in" the space, but "with" it (Retaillé 2006).

Such an understanding combines insights from different research agendas, including those of critical geopolitics and the 'practice turn' in

IR. Agnew (2004: 5) defines critical geopolitics as "the study of […] all the geographical assumptions, designations and understandings that enter into the making of world politics", while Tuathail and Dalby (1998: 3) emphasise the importance of studying "the spatial *practices*, both material and representations, of statecraft itself" (emphasis added). Our analytical focus on spatial representations and spatial practices builds on the theoretical underpinnings comprised by the categories introduced by Lefebvre (1974) and further developed by Agnew and Corbridge (1995) after him: "Spatial practices refer to the material and physical flows, interactions, and movements that occur in and across space as fundamental features of economic production and social reproduction. Representations of space involve all of the concepts, naming practices, and geographical codes used to talk about and understand spatial practices" (Agnew and Corbridge 1995: 7). From this point of view, representations of space can be seen as including geopolitical imaginaries (Dalby 2010), security imaginaries (Guzzini 2013), and regional imaginaries, that is to say, the socially shared narratives and discourses out of which representations about the world and the position of a country in the international system are created, drawing on a common "reservoir of raw meanings embedded in their collective memory of the expert field, including historical scripts and analogies" (Guzzini 2013: 52).[19] A comprehensive understanding of space must thus encompass all the representations and practices taking place in and about the space in question.

Applying this view to regions and regionalisms means acknowledging not only that regions deploy in and with space, but also that such space is not a natural given. It is instead a social construct, produced by very

[19] Leaving aside caricatural dichotomies, however, we must acknowledge that the constructivist understanding of space clarifies and radicalises an insight which is not completely unprecedented in the history of geopolitics. Despite allegations of determinism, academic geopolitical thinking as developed after the second world war proved itself aware of the significance of the human and social features – such as representations, perceptions, imaginations, memories and (albeit to a lesser extent) practices – that contribute to defining places and spaces beyond their mere material endowment or geographical position. Cohen (2003), deemed to have pioneered the re-birth of the discipline in the post-war period, explicitly attempted to eschew this criticism. Even Colin Gray (1999) has recognised that imagined spatial features count at least as much as physical ones in the geopolitical equation. Ultimately, the French School definition of geopolitics typically stresses the same point: "In order to understand a geopolitical conflict or rivalry, it is insufficient merely to determine and map what is at stake, instead it is necessary to understand the reasons and the ideas of the main actors" (Lacoste 1993: 4).

diverse practices, often informal and inarticulate, including habits, movements, language and labour but also discourses, symbols, imaginaries and norms drawing on alternative repertoires of contention and contestation (Mattheis 2014).

Questioning the "geographic fate" of spaces inevitably leads to questioning their political attributes. Scholars have observed that the deterministic understanding of space underlying a-critical geopolitics has traditionally served the "state's mode of production" (Brenner and Elden 2009: 359), which obviously includes the production of both the state itself and the centralised governance of security as its necessary corollary. On the other hand, according to Dalby (2008), the research agenda of critical geopolitics lies precisely in questioning the non-necessary nature of contemporary practices of subjection within modern states. By prioritising meanings and uses over supposedly "objective" essences, the very nature of places, spaces and identities is understood as subject to perpetual adjustments and negotiations carried out by and among a variety of actors.

In order to foster this research agenda, therefore, we seek to shift the analytical focus from the inner circles of state power in capital cities to the margins of states, close to borderlines and border regions, where these dynamics of inclusion and exclusion play out differently. Scholars have observed that these interstitial spaces often amount to transitional zones of indetermination between inside and outside, belonging and non-belonging, functioning in the manner of a 'transmission belt' in which sovereignties fade into one another and informal patterns of interaction stand out. Hence, while neorealism dismisses informal cross-border practices taking place across supposedly buffer areas as nothing more than expressions of illegality, state-fragility and backwardness (see also Neumann and Wigen 2012) with limited security relevance, the critical approach we espouse suggests that the inherently teleological bias of this view be debunked, leaving us free to pay greater attention to how the "territorial trap" (Agnew 1994) of statehood is incessantly de-constructed by local agencies. Social theorists have drawn on a variety of analytical categories in the effort to capture these dynamics. Balibar (1997) has adopted the notion of frontier as '*espace de partage*', thus playing on the double meaning of the French word "*partage*" as both sharing and split, allocation and communion. Similarly, Noel Parker emphasises the heuristic potential of the notion of margins, the implicit openness of which suggests that "the identities of entities are continuously being determined and re-determined" (Parker 2009: 28), instead of being pre-determined by a sovereign

decision. Stretching the same line of constructive reasoning beyond the state and to the regional level, it becomes clear that "regional borders are not 'cutting' social practices in some abstract way, but rather it is the relational social practices and discourses that produce and reproduce boundaries as part of the perpetual region-building process" (Murphy et al. 2015: 6). These remarks emphasise the fact that trans-border interactions occur in spite of attempts to delimit, control and govern contested frontiers, instead contributing to creatively deconstructing and reconstructing the very boundaries and logics of belonging that are supposed to shape them. Region-building processes, in other words, are not bound to originate solely from the central (black?-) box of state power; they can also stem from the peripheries in a decentralised manner. This observation does, however, prevent us from adopting a methodological nationalism that focuses exclusively on states as the only relevant actors of regional dynamics. Instead, it points to the need for an ex-centric outlook in order to develop an accurate description of the alternative relevant dynamics making up regional security complexes.

Building on these conceptual premises, we call for the main dichotomies of mainstream scholarly works devoted to regionalism (regionalism vs. regionalisation, project vs. process, etc.) to be debated and reframed, and suggest a new pair of categories with the analytical power to capture the diversity of region-building: regionalism from the centre and regionalism from the peripheries. The juxtaposition is not meant to suggest that they occur in an isolated fashion; rather, these two regionalisms often intersect, either reinforcing or opposing each other. As has been argued with respect to the distinction between micro-regions and macro-regions, studies making a clear-cut division between the two categories have underestimated the variety of regionalisms and the linkages among them (Söderbaum 2018). The juxtaposition serves rather to underline the fact that the centre is not the only place endowed with the capacity to "go regional". This emphasis on the regionalising potential of informal practices unfolding at the fringes of the states allows us to soften the conventional dichotomy of state versus non-state (actors, spaces, dynamics, etc.). Recent scholarship has increasingly highlighted the networked (Bach 2016) and hybrid (Boege et al. 2008) nature of political orders, especially in the postcolonial spaces at the margins of the states, where different claims to power co-exist, overlap and intertwine, and the state shares its authority, legitimacy and capacity with other providers of identity and

security (Albrecht and Wiuff Moe 2015). The complex web of relationships entertained by state and non-state actors challenges the black-and-white dichotomies of the logic of sovereignty, instead highlighting the need to account for "grey areas", that is, "liminal zones that the state has never fully controlled, which are not outside of it, but in relation to it, politically, economically, or culturally" (Bayart 2010). The regionalisms emerging from the fringes thus contribute to capturing the agency of alternative providers of regionhood, while making clear that these are not necessarily autonomous from the state, nor politically or physically inaccessible to the state, but rather entangled with it.

The conceptualisation so far delineated might contribute to the relatively recent literature on shadow regionalism (Hettne 2005), just as much as the notion of shadow-state (Reno 2000; Scott 2009) has been used in different contexts to capture the alternative, more nuanced patterns of interaction among state and non-state actors prevalent some post-colonial spaces. However, we depart sharply from the conclusions reached by the literature on the economic agendas of civil war, the body of work that popularised the concept of "shadow state" (Reno 2000). Shadow states have been seen as easily inclined to fragment, collapse and breed conflicts, and cross-border informal economies as likely to prolong conflicts, especially in the poorly governed peripheries of weak states (Duffield 2000; Fearon 2003). Instead, in the case of shadow regionalism, we suggest that the cross-border connections from the peripheries can contribute to fostering integration and a common understanding of security, albeit ephemeral.

In spite of a widespread narrative, we concur with recent scholarly works emphasising the idea that informal cross-border flows are less a source of instability than they are an economic resource actors seek to preserve, and therefore a factor of political inertia. As Englebert (2014) has convincingly argued, the power of the social networks that benefit from the economic value of smuggling has significantly contributed to limiting the number of separatist movements in Africa, both successful and attempted. In a similar vein, Grant recognises that 'the extent of cross-border interaction would be a strong countervailing force to any secessionist movement' (Grant 2008: 111). For the same reasons, the economic and political interests invested in preserving existing state differentials as a major resource for local patronage politics networks have acted against the top-down approaches to regionalisation sponsored by state authorities

(Bach 2008). While most of these studies have focused namely on Africa, the increasing proliferation of a neopatrimonial mode of governance beyond the African continent (Bach and Gazibo 2012) legitimises the attempt to explore whether similar patterns can be found elsewhere. By embarking on such a path, we consciously depart from the typical eurocentric model of regional integration with its assumptions of rational, bureaucratic, unitary states that formally agree to submit to the regulating influence of regional organisations. Instead, we consider regions as social constructs, and therefore focus on the informal, fringe practices of region-building and their spatial deployment in areas that would otherwise be qualified as "buffers".

In questioning the alleged objectivity of disconnectors and advancing the idea that they possess a certain regionalising potential, we are particularly indebted to the notion of connectivity: "connectivity describes the way micro-regions cohere, both internally and with one another. […] It refers to the potentially all-round, sometimes nearly frictionless communication between micro-regions" (Horden 2012: 28). While the concept was originally outlined with specific reference to the micro-regions (defined as ecological niches) found in the Mediterranean Sea (see namely Horden and Purcell 2000), the "connective nature" of which is discussed above, Horden (2012: 28) concedes that "the determining capacity of the environment has been weak. The choice of lines and corridors of communication cannot, in the majority of the cases, simply be predicted by studying a physical map". Building on this perspective, McDougall and Scheele (2012) have intriguingly proposed the idea that the heuristic capacity of connectivity might be extended to interpret the phenomena observed in a quintessential buffer area such as the Sahara Desert.[20]

With a view to discussing the connective capacity of specific areas at the margins of the states and, a fortiori, their regionalising potential, we shall not focus on their geographic (environmental, topographical) attributes in the manner of an a-critical geopolitical investigation. Instead, we aim to emphasise the presence of specific places that provide for the physical infrastructure needed to strengthen interactional dynamics and micro-regional connections, places such as markets, cross-roads and corridors.

[20] This attempt provides an empirical grounding to a hypothesis of political thinking which posits the linkage and relative identification between the desert and the sea. This thread extends from Kant (1991 [1795]: 106: "the community of men is divided by uninhabitable parts of the earth's surfaces such as oceans and deserts") to Hegel (2011 [1837]: the "Sahara is a dried ocean"), to Braudel (1979: 171 "the Sahara is the second face of the Mediterranean").

From this perspective, the relative remoteness of these sites and their proximity to states' margins and borderlines can be seen as a key asset that contributes to the unfolding of patterns of fringe regionalism. As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013: 34) have noted, the "border is not just a device which blocks or obstructs flows, but namely one that articulates it". Sassen (2006) has adopted the notion of borderland to describe the assemblages of actors, norms and spaces specifically occurring in and across borderlines. Korf and Raeymaekers (2013) have further framed the discussion about borderlands as being about what happens where the state ends. Against the mainstream reiteration of a view "from the centre", our gamble in this book is to show that margins could instead be considered the centre of aggregating processes on a regional scale, processes that are well worth investigating.

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CHAPTER 3

The Practice of Fringe Regionalism: Evidence from the Caucasus and the Sahara

Abstract Mattheis, Raineri and Russo provide an empirical analysis of the Sahara and the Caucasus through the lens of fringe regionalism. They discuss how these regions have been framed and governed as buffer areas separating distinct regional organisations and regional security areas, and the emergence of competing narratives. They then focus on informal practices and exchanges in specific physical sites and portals within these borderlands, practices which perform connective functions across a region. The chapter demonstrates that the cross-border networks revolving around these connective sites progressively foster the emergence of new identities, and of new regional narratives connected to such identities.

Keywords Sahara • Caucasus • Borderlands • Regional identity • Cross-border trade

The discussion in the previous section pointed out a number of shortcomings in the literature on the production of regions and took inspiration from relevant streams in international relations, geography and sociology to forge the concept of fringe regionalism. Fringe regionalism is meant to be applied as a conceptual tool to identify and understand informal transnational political spaces that are not steered by a central state authority but rather emerge from the cross-border practices of non-state actors and informal institutions rooted in states' peripheries. Fringe regionalism

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highlights the structures, institutions and actors contributing to the emergence of such regional space.

This chapter uses fringe regionalism as a lens to understand the central role margins play in the production of regions. With a view to challenging the outdated deterministic premises of political geography and international relations, this section focuses on cases that present localities characterised by an apparent contradiction between where a place is located and what connectivity-function it plays. In fact, while these sites are nestled in areas of supposedly low intercourse and would thus be assumed to represent spaces of geographical peripheriality and social marginality, in reality they act as infrastructures for crucial dynamics of interaction at the local and regional levels. Here, cross-border networks thrive on widespread patterns of cross-border practices and provide fertile grounds for the emergence of transnational, cross-border identities that more or less overtly challenge the exclusive competence of the states to define the boundaries of regional cooperation and to foster security governance.[1] The discussion of the origins, appeals and breadth of these newly emerging identities irradiating from connective borderlands represents a crucial step to advance the research agenda on the regionalising potential of peripheries.

While we argue that the heuristic potential of this line of reasoning can be extended to a significant number of contexts worldwide, some of which will be cited in the next sections, two main cases guide our discussion here: the Sahara Desert and the Caucasus. Drawing on the taxonomy of case studies proposed by Eckstein (1975), these can be said to amount to "heuristic" cases, i.e. cases that are typical, standard examples of a wider category, featuring the most favourable conditions for the manifestation of the fringe regionalism under examination. Both the Sahara Desert and the Caucasus seem to embody all the defining characteristics of buffer areas or disconnectors: as desert and mountain, the conditions they embody are seen from the outside as an obstacle or challenge to governance. As a consequence, discovering that the predictions of conventional political geography fall flat in these cases would significantly decrease our confidence in these theories. On the other hand, such a discovery would represent a valuable building block for engaging in a more ambitious path of broader

[1] This observation contributes to advancing an emerging line of research focused on security pluralism and non-state security providers (Menkhaus 2016; Price 2016). Unlike previous research, however, this thread emphasises the latter's potential to foster regional integration and security beyond and across the jurisdictions of individual states.

generalisations with a view to developing an alternative theory of spaces and regions (see also Lyall 2014). Beyond providing an empirical anchorage for our case studies, the research agenda outlined here below aims to further develop the ideas of "frontier regionness", "region-building from the peripheries" and the "regionalising potential of the peripheries" – by applying the lens of fringe regionalism to other micro-regions. The move to accumulate additional cases, in particular, might result in a more systematic repertoire of physical sites the connectivity-function of which would seem to be contradicted by their location.

Both the Caucasus and the Sahara fall within the category of natural barriers: in line with their supposed geopolitical fate, they have been historically governed as places of disconnection. Furthermore, they have been included in different projects of regional institution-building premised on processes of spatial confinement and control and seeking to either fragment their space or frame them as coherent regions. As a result, both the Sahara Desert and the Caucasus have usually been framed not as centres but as borderlands.[2] These features constitute the rationale for comparison; moreover, cross-case parallelisms emerge precisely in the micro-dynamics of region-building from the peripheries, especially when looking at the way these developments are supported by shadow infrastructures and in turn support trans-state repertoires of identities and practices. In this case, however, the empirics have not been framed with a replication design, as we deemed such an approach less incisive in contexts where long-term path dependencies play very different roles. Consequently, the two case studies are situated as a chiasm across our conceptual framework. In the Sahara, cross-border interactions, identities and practices constitute the most significant connective tissue of region-building from the peripheries: shadow regionalising infrastructures emerge largely in contrast with the "institutional" representation of the Sahara that has traditionally been issued by the regional organisations operating there. In other words, until very recently, region-building from the peripheries has not been encapsulated by an explicit institutional vision of the "Saharan region" supported by credible means. In the Caucasus, in sharp contrast,

[2] To the extent that the Sahara Desert and the Caucasus can be characterised as borderlands, the analysis of their security dynamics contributes to the literature analysing the same phenomena in different case studies, likewise framed as borderlands, in which nevertheless cross-border transnational practices thrive, such as Colombia's forests (Idler 2013), Myanmar's heights (Scott 2009), Kyrgyzstan's valleys (Kaminski and Mitra 2012), and the so-called Af-Pak borderlands (in particular in Rabasa et al. 2007).

region-building from the peripheries has been activated and de-activated at different times and has acquired a political value of othering, conveying connotations of contestation and emancipation. In other words, in the Caucasus as well one can observe a contrast between the way the region is constructed by cross-border actors and the way it has been inserted in formal regional institution-building attempts. However, the process of region-building from the peripheries is not entirely embedded in shadow infrastructures; it expresses itself through a variety of formal and informal channels.

This section is divided into three interconnected sections. Firstly, we discuss how supposedly dis-connective borderlands, and the Sahara Desert and the Caucasus most notably, have in many cases been framed and governed as buffer areas separating distinct regional organisations and regional security areas, and how this situation has given rise to competing narratives. Secondly, we focus on specific physical sites and nodes (markets, corridors, passes, etc.) located in these borderlands that have performed connective functions across different states and regions by supporting informal practices and exchanges of great significance. Thirdly, we show that the cross-border networks pivoting around these connective sites have progressively fostered the emergence of new identities and regional narratives closely interrelated.

3.1 Frames and Boundaries: Regions as Practiced Authorities

The framing of the Sahara Desert as a buffer separating different regions can be traced back to the ancient Greeks. Since Herodotus, the Sahara Desert has been considered the southernmost natural frontier of the civilised world and portrayed as a "ridge of sand" praised for its inherent capacity to contain and distance barbarous infections.[3] In the Middle Ages, the Arab conquest of the Sahara contributed to spreading the same religion, language and legal framework from North Africa to the Sahel, and greatly contributed to the expansion of trans-Saharan trade. The slave trade dominated these activities, however, and proceeded alongside a racial discourse stressing cultural segregation between white northern

[3] Tellingly, the specific word adopted by Herodotus to define the concept of "civilised world" is *Oecumene*, whereas the desert is precisely an an-oecumene. Herodotus's view recalls Turner's classical triumphal definition of the "hither edge of free land", which he attributed to the American western frontier (Turner 1921).

Africans and sub-Saharan Africans living in the land of the blacks (*bilad al-sudan*), as historians have abundantly observed (Lofkrantz 2011; Lecocq 2015). Later on, European colonisers initially relied on Arab sources to conceptualise the geography of their new dominion and therefore incorporated the same spatial stereotypes (Lydon 2015). At the turn of the 19th and 20th century, for instance, French authorities and cartographers extensively – and negligently – relied on Leo Africanus's 1550 *Description of Africa* to establish the "natural" borderline dividing the Sahara up between Algeria, to the south, and Mali, to the north (Casajus 2011). Indeed, the Renaissance obsession with geometry resonated deeply with the positivistic French *koine* of the time (a fact which corroborates the critical geopolitics idea that cartography is never a "neutral" scientific endeavour). By fostering a *politique des races* that emphasised (quite creatively) socio-cultural divides, colonial divide and rule policies further entrenched this partition (Lecocq 2015). In the early 20th century, European historiographies deepened this divide by subsuming the whole of Mediterranean civilisation including northern Africa into European history, while relegating the rest of Africa to an obscure state of pre-history. Hegel's *Philosophy of World History* contributed a great deal to the authority enjoyed by this idea. In sum, across antiquity, modernity, and up to the present, historical, geographical, anthropological and political thinking has tended to incorporate a traditional view of the Sahara as a natural *limes* (Kaplan 1994) at the periphery of two distinct entities, akin to a barrier disconnecting two different worlds and, especially, two separate Africas: a sub-Saharan black, "proper" Africa, and a white northern Africa.[4]

Although this partition is epistemologically questionable and indeed has been questioned, it has nonetheless endured to the present and instilled a notable path-dependency on contemporary security imaginaries and regional groupings in and around the Sahara Desert. In post-colonial Africa, Saharan territories such as the Western Sahara, the Azou strip or Darfur have often triggered controversies and armed clashes underpinning the unilateral hegemonic ambitions of newly independent states, rather

[4] At the same time, however, some notable exceptions have surfaced in both the policy and academic worlds to stress the opposite view, that is, the idea that that the Sahara should be seen as a connector. These include: Théodore Monod, the Founder of the French Institute of Black Africa (in spite of the name given to the institution), Joseph Ki-Zerbo, the Burkinabe scholar who edited UNESCO's General History of Africa and, more recently, William Zartman and Fernand Braudel (Lydon 2015). In addition, the dominant streams of Pan-African ideology advocate for Africa to be seen as a continental unit in the political sense (Van Walraven 1999).

than patterns of regional cooperation and integration. And while Saharan states today are part of several regional organisations, their capacity to jointly address key security challenges (not only military security, but also environmental and food security are particularly relevant for the area) remains questionable. These organisations include the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Arab-Maghreb Union (AMU), the Francophonie, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), the Permanent Interstate Committee for drought control in the Sahel and the G5 Sahel grouping.

The geometry of these groupings varies substantially and, with the exception of the African Union,[5] none of them encompasses all the states located in the Saharan space. Moreover, few of them emphasise the dimension of "saharaness" as their common denominator, thus reinforcing the idea that the Sahara Desert does not amount to a unitary political space endowed with common features. The United Nations (UN) regional groupings likewise detach the sub-Saharan Africa region from the Middle East and North Africa, thus implicitly assuming that the Sahara Desert acts as a barrier between two separate regional entities. Many observers (see for instance Helly and Galeazzi 2014) have correctly noted that, given such fragmentation and the lack of a comprehensive regional framework, it is particularly difficult to coordinate efforts among the different actors involved in the region and to address emerging security threats in a coherent manner. While the conflicts sweeping across the Sahara are all interconnected, regional organisations and security systems are largely designed to deal with domestic or international threats rather than cross-border ones, and indeed the way they operate bolsters the fiction of non-porous borders delimiting areas of homogeneous sovereignty. The conflict in northern Mali,[6] however, "has underlined the importance of networks that straddle the Sahara: the area of concern not only includes the

[5] However, for over 30 years the exclusion of Morocco from its scope was due precisely to "Saharan" issues, i.e. the unresolved issue of the Western Sahara. Furthermore, just like other organisations with a larger number of members, such as the G77 group at the United Nations, most members of the AU are non-Saharan countries.

[6] This refers to the conflict erupted since late 2011–2012 among various non-state armed actors featuring different affiliations (religious, political, ethnic, nationalist) contending the sovereignty of the north and centre of Mali to the internationally recognised government in Bamako.

ECOWAS members Niger and Mali, but also Mauritania Western Sahara, Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Chad. Strengthening cooperation among ECOWAS states is not enough: Sahel governments should promote efforts to reach out to North African neighbours, and encourage trans-Saharan cooperation on counter-narcotics and counterterrorism" (Lacher 2013). The frustration expressed by a high-ranking officer of the Malian intelligence seems to confirm this view: "it is particularly hard to tackle the root causes of insecurity in such a hybrid security complex, because there are several regional groupings with different scope and purpose, but none of them deals with the Sahel or Sahara, as such".[7]

Notably, the few regional organisations that have moved counter to the predominant view by specifically focusing on trans-border Saharan issues have struggled with a crucial lack of resources, both material and immaterial, to support this alternative construction. Their fate is therefore indicative of the structural constraints preventing the emergence of a different framing of the Saharan regional identity. Moreover, hegemonic ambitions have largely prevailed over coordination and cooperation. Indeed, the CEN-SAD, created in 1998, was heavily sponsored by the former Libyan regime. With the new Moroccan leadership Algeria has departed from the grouping, and its capacity to deliver a sound political framework for tackling regional issues and to construct a common narrative of Saharan identity is seriously compromised. Morocco's recent ambitions to join ECOWAS further undermine the prospects of this organisation. With a view to balancing Libya's regional hegemony, Algeria sponsored the construction of the *Comité d'état-major opérationnel conjoint* (CEMOC) based in Tamanrasset (Algeria) and tasked with coordinating the efforts of the so-called *Pays du camp* (Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, Niger), namely to improve security and counter transnational threats in the region. However, the strategic exclusion of key regional players such as Libya, Chad and most notably Morocco ignited controversies, while on the other hand Algeria's strategic doctrine and constitutional provisions prevented the cross-border deployment of military forces, thereby obviously limiting the effective reach of the alliance (Ammour 2013). Subsequent developments and the eruption of widespread insecurity in the area have attested to the ineffectiveness of the CEMOC, and high-ranking officers in the Malian army have described the CEMOC as "utterly useless and completely ineffective".[8]

[7] Interview with Malian intelligence officer in Bamako, October 2014.

[8] Interview with a former general of the Malian Armed Forces in Bamako, November 2013.

In an effort to overcome the CEMOC's patent limits, since 2013 Mauritania has sponsored the so-called *Processus de Nouakchott* that brings together states on both sides of the Sahara such as Algeria, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Chad. This alliance pledged to fight cross-border terrorist and criminal organisations, including through the creation of intelligence sharing platforms, joint military patrols and a multi-national military task force. The *Processus de Nouakchott* gained momentum in 2014 during Mauritania's presidency of the AU, when it was placed under the aegis of the AU and explicitly tasked with fostering the African peace and security architecture between the Sahel and North Africa. However, the regional ambitions of the new organisation were hard-won and ultimately proved short-lived: the final Declaration of the Presidential meeting held in Nouakchott in December 2014 acknowledged the "constraints of the history and geography of the Sahelo-Saharan region, as well as contemporary political challenges",[9] and eventually the Nouakchott process was virtually hijacked by the rivalries between Morocco and Algeria. Facing the obstacles of institution-building, both countries have subsequently sponsored policies of regionalisation by encouraging the penetration of non-state networks, based on culture, religion and trade, into sub-Saharan African countries. In this case as well, however, these initiatives underwrite a bifurcation of the region based on state-led strategic hegemonic ambitions and local rivalries rather than regional integration plans (Lebovich 2017).

While failing to provide substantial support to the *Processus de Nouakchott*, the international community – the EU and France most notably – instead backed another regional cooperation format that emerged more or less simultaneously[10]: the G5 Sahel, which involved Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso. In spite of its original intent to cover a wide spectrum of policy areas from development to good governance, the G5 Sahel has focused its attention more and more exclusively on the issue of security. As a result, the G5 Sahel aims to coordinate the anti-terrorism efforts of French-speaking countries, former French-colonies and current French allies hosting French military bases, as part of the regionalising strategy of the French military operation Barkhane in the Sahel. Building on already-existing border security operations led by France, the G5 Sahel has progressively come to re-cover most of the pro-

[9] http://www.sidwaya.bf/m-3821-declaration-de-nouakchott-.html.
[10] Interview with AU military advisor in Bamako, November 2015.

grammes of the *Processus de Nouakchott*, including the creation of a multinational military task-forced that was formally authorised by a UN Security Council resolution in June 2017. This emphasis on military cooperation conceals the fact that the grouping actually has a much narrower sub-Saharan focus, however. The aim of preventing security threats from spilling across the borders, between the northern and southern shores of the Sahara Desert, largely prevails over efforts to cultivate cross-Saharan regional integration. This entails a risk to undermine the existing cross-border trade networks contributing to local resilience. In other words, the rationale of fragmentation and compartmentalisation continues to underpin formal attempts at region-building.

In recent years, the security anxieties of the international community have contributed to further reinforcing the discursive framing and contemporary governance of the Sahara Desert as a geopolitical insulator. Indeed, this view is eloquently confirmed by the way that both the EU and US, through dedicated international agencies and local partner governments, prioritise engaging in policed "border strengthening", anti-migration, anti-trafficking, and anti-drug patrols along the Saharan borderlines. US policies in the region have been premised on the idea that the "ungoverned" Saharan borderlands represent fertile grounds for global security threats such as terrorism and organised crime, and have therefore set out to enhance border controls and strengthen local security apparatuses through programmes such as the Pan-Sahelian Initiative and Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Partnership (Rabasa et al. 2007). Similarly, European neighbourhood and security policies have tended to create a sort of "buffer zone" of friendly embedded albeit non-belonging states along its borders, namely at the northern edge of the Sahara. Preventing irregular flows of arms, terrorists, criminals and migrants across Saharan borders has dominated EU security concerns since the 2011 EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel. Moreover, most of the resources the EU subsequently allocated to implement the November 2015 Valletta Political Declaration and Action Plan for Migration and Development (Council of the European Union 2015) have gone to foster programmes of borderisation (including border enhancement, border controls, capacity building to custom police, etc.) in Mali, Niger, Libya and Sudan (Van der Lijn 2017). Ironically, however, in many cases these externally-driven policies have ended up reinforcing the cross-border patronage networks scattered across the Saharan region, and the rise of informality and state corruption has prompted the emergence of defiant

political ideologies asserting alternative identifications (OECD and Sahel and West Africa Club 2017).

The Sahara Desert in Africa is not the only place regional space has been manipulated in geopolitical discourses to perform a role of polarisation and fragmentation between separate entities. Similar dynamics can be observed in our second case study, the Caucasus, the "lands in-between", the "region at the crossroads" as this area has often been described by scholars and policy-makers: "[i]n between the Black and Caspian Seas, Europa and Asia, Russia and the Middle East" (de Waal 2010: 1). The Caucasus conventionally includes the 3 South Caucasian countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) and the North Caucasian region, currently part of the Russian Federation. This fringe region has always appeared dissected, in spite of projects of unity – such as the Mountainous Republic in the North and the Transcaucasian Federative Republic in the South – that rose and vanished like flashes in the pan. Soviet policies aimed at controlling mountain people were based on forced displacement and ethno-demographic remodelling, which served to keep these communities fragmented and segmented (Radvanyi 2002). However, Glasgow-based historian Alex Marshall has reconsidered Cold War-era Western accounts of the history of the Caucasus under the Soviet rule. According to his archival research, the demise of the Mountaineer Republic, traditionally attributed to a deliberate "divide and rule" policy and overarching centralising objective on the part of the Bolsheviks, resulted instead from interethnic tensions therein (Marshall 2010: 179–180). While other strands of scholarship have referred to the process of "Balkanisation" to represent the gerrymandering of the region for the purpose of preventing its unity, Marshall has focused on the local political factors rather than alleged heavy-handed manipulation by Moscow: "[f]ar from being a deliberately conceived and executed neo-imperialist design to divide and subjugate the nationalities of the North Caucasus, the emergence of numerous national republics during the 1920s appears to have been a genuinely improvised response to sometimes violent interethnic unrest and violence".[11]

[11] Likewise, Marshall's reconstruction has reassessed and rescaled the visions of Caucasian unity, reportedly ascribable to the activity of the diaspora communities often supported by external actors (Britain, Poland, Turkey, Germany…). "Following the expulsion of their respective governments from the Caucasus by Soviet power, the various representatives of Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus achieved a brief unity ironically altogether lacking earlier" (Marshall 2010: 217), by signing in Paris, in June 1921 a memorandum of understanding, declaring the need for a close "brotherly" union amongst all of them.

In the wake of the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, the delimitation and management of borders was considered a crucial and constitutive aspect of post-Soviet statehood in the making. The establishment of borders has thus signified a completely novel way of claiming sovereign authority and signalling ownership within a bounded territorial space. In 1991, however, only a small fraction of the borders between former Soviet republics had been demarcated, and none of the newly independent states were able to exert effective control over their own borders; on the other hand, the aim of border policy was to continue the process of de-integration and such policies continued to govern the Caucasus as a disconnector.

On one hand, border management has often relied on bilateral agreements between Russia and the individual post-Soviet countries, authorising the deployment of Russian border troops inside their territories; on the other hand, several post-Soviet states convened special commissions for the delimitation and demarcation of state borders. In November 1993, a commission of representatives from Russia, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya and Georgia met in Sochi to begin work on demarcating the Russian–Georgian border. A preliminary demarcation protocol was signed in February 1996, followed by further cooperative developments as well as moments of stalemate. A further protocol on border delimitation and future border agreements was signed on March 2000, but this protocol left the issue of the Ossetian border unresolved. By the same token, the project of delimiting the borders between Azerbaijan and Russia was hindered by the demarcation of the Dagestani sector.

In parallel to this process, the institutionalisation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) sought at the re-integration of the former Soviet space, including a top-down reconnection of the Caucasus. Indeed, the current configuration of this region also stems from a broader process of re-designing the post-Soviet area carried out over the last two decades and manifested in an assortment of regional and sub-regional organisations that proliferated and overlapped in the same geopolitical expanse. Quite obviously, none of these organisations was the expression of some

Caucasian émigrés then established their own formal political organisations (1924), such as the Prague-based "Union of Caucasian Mountaineers" and the Istanbul-based "Caucasian Independence Committee" (which eventually shifted its base of operations to Paris in 1926). Caucasian diaspora communities regrouped in 1926 in Warsaw, where the "People's Party of Caucasus Mountaineers" was set up. However, in 1927 a Georgian representative called for German support in the creation a unified Caucasus federation with its main political centre in Tbilisi, renovating a traditional rivalry within the Caucasian diaspora that had repeatedly threatened the fragile illusion of unity.

sort of "Caucasianness"; on the contrary, the image of South Caucasus as a "divided" or even a "broken" region (De Waal 2012; Boonstra and Delcour 2015) seems to have been confirmed.

The Organisation for Democratic and Economic Development (GUAM) was launched as a cooperative initiative in 1997[12] by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova,[13] and then institutionalised in 2001 as a consultative forum. While GUAM proved to be more a framework for coordination and discussion than a mechanism for implementing policies, Russia has considered it a by-product of the United States' alleged intentions to influence projection in the region. Moreover, in spite of the fact that membership in GUAM and CIS are not incompatible, these two projects have conveyed a rather divergent international positioning: in fact, GUAM members overtly declared their aspirations towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration and their willingness to emancipate themselves from Russia-centred security structures. Thus, while Georgia and Azerbaijan decided to withdraw from the Collective Security Treaty in 1999, Armenia opted for membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Over time, therefore, the three South Caucasian countries have increasingly diverged in terms of their policies towards the other post-Soviet/Eurasian regional organisations; this divergence is the result of a non-linear trajectory moulded by domestic politics, separatist conflicts, trade/energy/military dependence on Russia, and the availability of alternative international alignments (see Russo 2018).

At the same time, while all the CIS members joined the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in January 1992 (except for Russia, which was declared the continuator state of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, USSR), Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia established differential relations with other "Western" institutions such as the Council of Europe and European Union. The latter has extensively promoted the idea of an interconnected South Caucasus to be integrated into the Eastern sector of its Neighbourhood: accordingly, the European Neighbourhood

[12] On the occasion of a meeting in the framework of the Council of Europe, held in Strasbourg.

[13] These countries' initials form the acronym that gives its name to their coalition. As a matter of fact, with Uzbekistan joining GUAM in 1999, the initiative became GUUAM; nevertheless, the brief period of Uzbek participation lasted only few years, as Uzbekistan firstly decided to suspend its membership three years later and then withdrew in May 2005, following the controversial events that occurred in Andijan. Similarly, the Community of Democratic Choice was established in 2005 and its founding members include Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Azerbaijan has observer status.

Instrument (ENI) (2014–2020) has allocated significant funds to regional initiatives and mechanisms. Moreover, a simple review of the projects that have actually been carried out over the last few years through ENI (and, previously, through the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, 2007–2013), suggests that many of them entail a South Caucasian dimension (and are supported by a pool of other international donors, such as the United Nations Development Programme, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, International Labour Organisation, etc.).[14] The establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (and its enlargement policies) and the cooperation frameworks created by the EU Association Agreements have renewed competition between two divergent integration projects in the so-called "shared neighbourhood", further fragmenting the region.

Nevertheless, the abovementioned dynamics do not convey an exhaustive picture of the political re-ordering that has shaped the Caucasus since the dismemberment of the Soviet Union. Driven by instances of separatism on both sides of the mountains, "internal frontiers" have multiplied[15] and unconventional forms of solidarity have arisen among non-state actors

[14] A non-exhaustive list includes: Support to Integrated Border Management Systems in the South Caucasus; South Caucasus Anti-Drug Programme; Development/Strengthening of Comprehensive Anti-Trafficking Responses in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia; Strengthening Protection Capacity Project in the Southern Caucasus – Developing a Regional Protection Response in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia; Fostering Community Forest Policy and Practice in Mountain Regions of the Caucasus; Sustainable Land Management for Mitigating Land Degradation and Reducing Poverty in the South Caucasus Region; Trans-Boundary River Management for the Kura River; Caucasus Cultural Initiatives Network; The South Caucasus Mediation & Dialogue Initiative for Reignited Peace Processes (see Russo 2015).

[15] As part of the process of borderisation occurring at the administrative border between Georgia and South Ossetia, Russian border guards have been deployed and fences and barbed wire have been installed along the line. Borderisation is leading to the segregation of South Ossetia and the creation of a frontier inside Georgia. Georgian criminologist Alexandre Kukhianidze reported that, before borderisation escalated, both Georgian authorities and separatist leaders allowed the border to remain open for smuggling and the movement of criminal groups from one side of the conflict zone to the other. On one hand, Georgian authorities declared that they could not establish Border Guard and Customs Service checkpoints on the Inguri River and Roki tunnel because secessionists would immediately interpret it as an attempt to establish a new border. On the other hand, de facto governments in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali were not able to control their territories and prevent the various (Abkhaz and Georgian) crime groups from engaging in their activities (Kukhianidze 2004: 90). However, the advancement of the borderisation process does not seem to be preventing the seal of the "Administrative Boundary Line" (Author's visit to the EUMM Field Office Mtskheta, July 2016).

seeking statehood recognition. Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh,[16] for instance, created the Commonwealth of Unrecognised States (CUS)[17]: in 2000, representatives of the four statelets met in Tiraspol and launched their own Foreign Ministers' Forum. Subsequently, at a 2001 meeting in Stepanakert, they agreed to create this grouping.[18]

In 2006 the Presidents of Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia met in Sukhumi and signed a Joint Declaration on Creation of the Community for Democracy and Rights of Nations, and in 2009 they agreed to abolish visa regimes for their citizens. Quite tellingly, these de facto states pursued their "ways to sovereignty" in part through challenging state-led bordering policies and establishing their own visa policies.[19] The Commonwealth of Unrecognised States is a competing (although limited) experiment in trans-Caucasian region-building which has not been driven by recognised states. Of a different nature are the various pan-Caucasian projects that emerged in the 1990s (the Congress of the Islamic Nation; the Organisation of Caucasian Solidarity "Caucasus Dom"; the Organisation of Islamic Unity of the Caucasus; the All-Russia Cultural Centre "Al-Islamiia"; the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus; the Congress of the Peoples of Ichkeniya and Dagestan, with its own military arm – the Islamic Peacemaking Battalion; and the Islamic Jamaat of Dagestan) and aimed the creation of an Islamic State in the eastern North Caucasus.

While in the early Nineties the Chechen insurgency represented an "archetypical case of ethnonationalist separatism" (Souleimanov 2015: 86), over the second half of the decade it gradually transformed into a Jihadist movement. On that basis, an organisational structure to coordi-

[16] They have all been engaged in mimicking the activities of national governments, being involved in "para-diplomatic activities", dispatching representatives abroad and trying to develop their status in the international context by means of collective legitimation. Abkhazia and South Ossetia applied for membership in CIS and CSTO, as was declared in September 2008 during a joint press conference in Moscow by Sergei Bagapsh and Eduard Kokoity, the Abkhazian and South Ossetian representatives, respectively.

[17] Similarly, during the Nineties Abkhazia established relations with two other unrecognised states: Serbian Krajina in Croatia and the Respublika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

[18] These events were allegedly supported by Russia and can be interpreted as a reaction to the creation of GUAM by the parent-states of the de-facto states http://uaforeignaffairs.com/ua/blog/usi-blogi/view/article/is-it-foreign-policy-of-the-unrecognized-states/#sthash.8h56wOPC.dpuf. See also Kosienkowski 2012: 50.

[19] http://uaforeignaffairs.com/ua/blog/usi-blogi/view/article/is-it-foreign-policy-of-the-unrecognized-states/#sthash.8h56wOPC.dpuf.

nate the activities of jihadist movements throughout the North Caucasus (Caucasian Front or Caucasian Mujahadeen) was established in 2005 and the formation of the Islamic Emirate of the North Caucasus was announced in 2007, signalling the decisive shift from a Chechen national liberation struggle to a pan-Caucasian struggle for an Islamist state.

Furthermore, although the circulation of combatants that has enhanced political and military linkages and informal networks between North Caucasian factions and the militias of the breakaway territories is not a new phenomenon,[20] fighters from both sides of the mountain have renewed their connections in the context of two geopolitically distant but similarly internationalised conflicts, those in Syria and the Ukraine (Cecire 2016).

3.2 Markets and Infrastructures: Regions as Practiced Economies

Despite the geographically and socially peripheral status of fringe regionalisms, marginal borderlands can perform as infrastructures for crucial dynamics of interaction at the local and regional levels. This subsection looks at cross-border networks that thrive on the economic practices shaping the region. The economic practice of fringe regionalisms retains an ambivalent relationship with the state: on one hand it undermines and circumvents the state-controlled economy while on the other hand it benefits from the informal intersection of state and non-state actors.

In spite of the partitioning implicitly endorsed by the majority of contemporary regional security complexes, anthropologists and human geographers are keen to acknowledge that "the Sahara and the Sahel form a single space of movement which should be considered as a continuum, something that a territorial approach of states and geopolitics prevents us from understanding" (Retaillé and Walther 2010). Similarly, historians of the Sahara contend that the Sahara should be seen as "the second face of the Mediterranean" (Braudel 1979) and, as such, interpreted as a space of connection rather than a factor of insulation. "The Sahara was always a borderland, in the sense of a zone constituted by its multiple interactions

[20] Chechnya's President Ramzan Kadyrov and the leaders of the other North Caucasus republics immediately voiced their support for the decision to recognise Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence while welcoming their refugees. Furthermore, in August 2008, a Chechen battalion (the Yamadaev-led "Vostok") participated in the operations in South Ossetia. See Merlin 2011; Zakareishvili 2011.

with neighbouring worlds, without which it would be unable to survive" (McDougall 2012: 82). In the Sahara's harsh desert environment, in fact, people ensure their survival by relying on their own mobility, not the productivity of the soil. From this perspective, the Sahara Desert amounts to a busy crossroads and central node of cross-border trade, in contrast to its perceived condition of marginality; in fact, the latter simply mirrors outsiders' prejudices and views rather than a careful assessment of the situation on the ground. Shifting the analytical focus as closely as possible to the insiders' perspective[21] allows one to consider Saharan cities (Pliez 2011), stopover towns (Daniel 2014) and border markets (Scheele 2012) as connective nodes thriving on external inputs and making outer worlds live. As a consequence, an approach that focusing uniquely on bounded states and centralised planning fails to capture the most relevant aspects of Saharan regional dynamics.

The perspective of fringe regionalism suggests that significant patterns of more or less unauthorised flows of trade, smuggling and trafficking across the Sahara are less an anomaly requiring explanation than the rule demanding comprehension, a rule whose impact on regional dynamics must not be overlooked. The border market of In-Khalil provides a particularly illustrative example of these trends.[22] In-Khalil is situated in the middle of the Sahara Desert, along the border dividing Algeria from Mali, just 15 km from the border post station of Bordji Badji Mokhtar. It is defined by the local people as "the capital of al-frud", the illegal smuggling that has been the cornerstone of the nomadic economy for ages. The phrase "local people" is inaccurate, however, in that very few of those who have settled and set up businesses in In-Khalil were actually born there. The first sedentary house was built in 1993, when the nomad camp previously located there was swamped by the flow of refugees and displaced people fleeing the 1990s Tuareg-led insurrection in Mali. Since then, In-Khalil has remained beyond the reach of the Malian state or, indeed, any other formal state structure. As reported by the anthropologist Judith Scheele, all the people living in In-Khalil insist on their status of stateless-

[21] The work of Cosgrove (2007) has popularised the heuristic productivity of insiders' and outsiders' perspectives in the field human geography. Interestingly, they had been already employed in security studies with a view to identifying security practices, especially in the context of another so-called "ungoverned space", such as Somalia (Menkhaus 2006).

[22] While part of discussion that follows is based on evidence collected during different rounds of fieldwork in Mali and Niger between 2013 and 2015, we are particularly indebted to the seminal work carried out by Judith Scheele in and about In-Khalil.

ness and value it as a matter of personal pride. Local norms convey a unique overlapping of the ideals of liberty, masculinity and mobility (Scheele 2012: 19).

The remoteness of the location and its proximity to an international border – or, in other words, its condition of borderland – represent the most significant assets of In-Khalil's political economy. Interviews with local observers confirm that "all sorts of traffic take place at In-Khalil, and everyone, every armed group has an interest there".[23] In-Khalil was consistently held up by different sources and interviewees as the fundamental cornerstone of all the extra-legal trade taking place in the region, including drugs, cigarettes, subsidised foodstuffs, weapons and human beings.[24] Subsidised goods such as foodstuffs and fuel come from Algeria and are sold at the black market of Gao, northern Mali's biggest town. Migrants are smuggled in the other direction: coming from all the countries on the gulf of Guinea, they gather in Gao where they can purchase counterfeit Malian passports, allowing visa-free entry into Algeria and Morocco, for 50–70 euros.[25] The migrant smuggling practices and routes experience significant cross-time variation and are highly sensitive to the degree of control and repression exercised by local (i.e. non-stated armed groups), regional (i.e. Algeria) and external (i.e. the European Union) actors in the broader Saharan area, including in the regional migration hub of Agadez, in Niger. Connecting Gao to In-Khalil, the arid Tilemsi valley remains the most popular corridor for both trucks and 4 × 4 vehicles carrying migrants north. From In-Khalil, further passeurs can facilitate the way forward towards Ceuta, the Spanish enclave in Morocco, or Sebha, in southern Libya. The international smuggling of cigarettes is another extremely lucrative business that reaches In-Khalil's warehouses from the seaports of the Gulf of Guinea via the Tilemsi Valley, before proceeding onward towards Algeria and Libya.

[23] Interview with north Mali's resident and security consultant, Bamako, October 2014.

[24] Although on these matters, whose intelligibility is by definition obscure, empirical evidence going beyond gossips is hard to collect, many interesting reports citing credible sources have been published. See namely: Briscoe 2014; Lacher 2012; Lebovich 2013; Musilli and Smith 2013; Raineri and Strazzari 2015; Scheele 2009, 2011 and 2012; Shaw and Tinti 2014; UNODC 2011.

[25] Interview with Malian police, Bamako, December 2013; and with officer of Mali's Minister of Foreign Affairs, October 2014. In the most recent years, though, these flows might have changed due to Algeria's enhanced border controls and to prevailing insecurity in the north of Mali.

Until 2011, the smuggling of illicit goods had largely overlapped with trade in licit goods in terms of actors, roads and organisational arrangements (Lacher 2012; Cantens and Raballand 2016). The eruption of widespread violence in northern Mali and the broader region proved detrimental to the less profitable forms of traffic, however, such as the those in highly detectable licit goods (irrespective of their economic and social significance for the communities affected). Conversely, the soaring number of prospective suppliers of armed protection, including various non-state armed actors, provided an incentive to the development of the most profitable trade in illicit goods.

Narcotic drugs represent a case in point. As part of the broader infrastructure created for the smuggling of licit goods, In-Khalil soon became a hub for the newly emerging narcotics flows. During the last decade, flows of hashish resin have come to north Mali from Morocco (the larger regional supplier) via Mauritania (Peduzzi 2010; Julien 2011). Also, major flows of cocaine originating from South America have travelled along the so-called "trans-Atlantic cocaine highway" (UNODC 2011) and converged towards safe warehouses in In-Khalil. Allegedly unloaded at storage points along the Atlantic shores of West-Africa, including Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and further south in Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria, cocaine has reached the heart of the Sahara Desert by air, on small planes, or by land, on 4 × 4 vehicles convoys driving across the relatively un-patrolled Sahelian borderlands. From In-Khalil, the largest share of narcotic drugs proceeds further north-east to Libya and especially Egypt before being diverted to either Europe or Arab countries. Along the way, these flows have fuelled a thriving illegal economy: according to local observers, one kilo of cocaine can have a local value of between 20 and 30,000 euros, while drivers shipping cocaine on a segment of the route earn 4–7,000 euros per trip.[26] These resources, so much more bountiful than any other economic activity locally available, have powered an economic boom. Local businessmen made a fortune on these informal activities that was later converted into increased political status and, in some cases, military might. The peripheral location and existence of the border were turned into economic advantages and constituted a bottom-up economic driver of regionalisation. As a true global trade epicentre, In-Khalil is also a famous site for money-laundering operations. With its *garaji* (garages) and infrastructures, In-Khalil can satisfy

[26] Interviews with drug experts from Gao and Timbuktu, conducted in Bamako, November 2014.

all sorts of drivers' needs, including repairs, water supply, entertainment and women, thus making it a mandatory stopover. Weapons are also reportedly traded in In-Khalil, either brought in from Libya, stemming from West African regional conflicts (Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast in particular) or diverted from Mali's national stocks (Anders 2015).[27]

At the very opposite end of the spectrum of the bounded village community, Scheele explicitly cites Horden and Purcell (2000) to qualify In-Khalil as "a node of intensity in an overlapping matrix of connectivity" (2012: 200). Places like In-Khalil thus perform a crucial connective role linking the northern and southern shores of the Sahara, from Burkina Faso to Algeria and from Senegal to Libya, in spite of increasing efforts by regional security frameworks to clamp down on irregular cross-border flows. While formally banned, it seems unlikely that these informal practices are being carried out completely unbeknownst to local authorities. And indeed, a growing number of reports underscore the active role of top-level political authorities, or members of their families, in developing and organising the regional cross-border traffic in licit and illicit goods. This has proved to be the case virtually everywhere throughout the Saharan region, for instance in Algeria (Boilley 2011), Burkina Faso,[28] Guinea (Lewis 2014), Guinea-Bissau (Shaw and Reitano 2013), Libya (Toaldo 2015), Mali (Lacher 2012; Briscoe 2014), Mauritania (Boas 2014), Morocco (Strazzari 2014), and Niger (Raineri 2018). In light of the prevalence of patronage politics and big men networks (Utas 2012) in the Saharan region, just as significant a presence as elsewhere in Africa and the world, therefore, contemporary research is required to delve below the surface of formal politics and explicit decision-making. Instead, the analytical focus must shift away from the intricacies of political parties and towards the informal practices which actually make up power dynamics and security governance. While less visible, their impact cannot be overestimated. As scholars have pointed out (Bach 2008), in fact, economic and political interests in the preservation of existing state borders, as a profit-generating resource for local networks of patronage politics, have acted against the top-down approaches to regionalism sponsored by state

[27] Information confirmed in the framework of interviews with former combatants and UN security experts, conducted in Bamako in November 2014.

[28] Interview with Malian criminal prosecutor, conducted in Bamako in November 2014. According to judicial sources François Compaoré, brother of the fallen dictator Blaise Compaoré, was particularly active in the organisation of the cigarette smuggling across the Sahel.

authorities. Informal regionalism from the peripheries can easily, tacitly, circumvent these obstacles while nonetheless serving to foster integration. It is not by chance that a recent report on regional dynamics in the Saharan space comes to the conclusion that "uprooting the informal structures that, over the years, have grown up around smuggling will result in economic and social dislocation and make stability more difficult to obtain" and therefore stresses that "a more flexible strategy on subsidies and smuggling, aimed at formalising the informal, could help better integrate border communities" (Lebovich 2017: 12).

The phenomenon of marginal spaces serving as economic centres of a fringe regionalism and the impossibility of disentangling state and non-state actors in cross-border economic practices are also manifest in the case of the Caucasus.

In the South Caucasus, forms of connectivity extending across administrative and/or international borders have survived both the materialisation of inter-state boundaries and the freezing of conflict borderlines separating breakaway provinces from their respective government-controlled territories. Lale Yalçın-Heckmann (2016: 142) has reported the results of a study on a Georgian speaking, Muslim minority community, the Ingiloy in Azerbaijan, whose collective memory continues to resonate with the habits and patterns of mobility they developed before there was a border between Azerbaijan and Georgia. More generally, research suggests that borderland residents remember the borders between the Soviet republics as largely insignificant, and these frames affected their interpretation of border crossing for several years after 1991. Not only did people continue to organise their livelihoods across the borders for commercial, educational and religious purposes, they also informally changed official national borders by swapping lands (Mirimanova 2006: 537; Yalçın-Heckmann 2016: 145).[29] Kin and friendship networks extending across the borders ("Azerbaijani in Georgia and in Armenia, Armenians in Azerbaijan and Georgia, Georgians—such as the long assimilated Ingiloys in the Zaqatala and Qax districts, but also small groups of Georgian speaking and Orthodox ethnic Georgians in Azerbaijan", Yalçın-Heckmann

[29] Informal practices of mobility have shaped and are shaping regional landscapes paving the way to "the bottom-up and everyday emergence of new orders in the fields of economy, morale, urban development and migration", as highlighted by The Marshrutka Project (http://marshrutka.net, retrieved on 15 June 2018). The latter indeed is exactly studying how the use of minibuses, locally known as *marshrutkas*, contributes to the production of post-Soviet social and spatial configurations.

2016: 144) substantially shape the labour markets in borderlands areas. Significant volumes of all sorts of licit and illicit goods were traded in cross-border bazaars where petty traders and producers from Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia met up. Some of the most significant of these sites include Sagarejo/Qaraçöp in the Kakheti region during the late 1980s and early 1990s and Sadakhlo from the early 1990s to approximately 2004.

In Georgia, the local population has continued to conceive of borders as permeable even in the context of Abkhaz and Ossetian separatism, and indeed their everyday transgressions of border regimes underpin social and economic relations based on kinship and friendship (Khutsishvili 2016). Furthermore, people forcibly displaced following the military operations staged by the separatist conflicts often find an important basis for survival in petty trade and smuggling. It is worthy underlining that all economic cooperation between Georgia and its "occupied territories" takes place in the realm of the shadow economy (Mirimanova 2006: 525) and that criminal groups operating in the border regions have profited widely from the frozen conflict economies thriving around the de facto borderlines between Georgia and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, respectively (Khutsishvili 2016). Although the separatist borders are not recognised, their existence does foster fringe regionalism in that these borders create informal economies that reshape the regional space.

Along the security zone straddling the respective conflict lines, law enforcement officials, criminal groups, peacekeepers and border-guards cooperate to ensure the functioning of smuggling networks (Kukhianidze et al. 2004: 21). This mixture of state and non-state actors involves a second layer of complexity in that it is composed of different nationalities, chiefly Georgian, Russian, Abkhaz and Ossetian, including returnees, refugees, internally displaced people and residents of the conflict areas. In spite of – or, on closer inspection, thanks to – the ban on the import and export of food products and industrial goods to and from Abkhazia, demand on both sides of the Administrative Boundary Line has continued to drive and boost the informal trade across it.[30]

[30] Author's visit to the EUMM Field Office Mtskheta (July 2016); see also The EUMM Monitor: A bulletin from the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia, Issue 2 – August 2016 that reports: "[d]espite obstacles, grassroots contacts between Georgians and Abkhaz are increasing. Each day, up to several thousand commuters cross the Enguri River, many to conduct suitcase trade in Abkhazia of commodities and agricultural goods, but also pharmaceuticals and medical equipment".

Similar observations can be carried out for the other two countries in the region: in the South Caucasus, criminal groups comprising mixed ethnic structures "carry out robberies and kidnappings in ways that take advantage of the opportunities and vulnerability of the life of the borderland" (Khutsishvili 2016: 122). Arms smuggling, for example, represents a sector of mutually fruitful cooperation between Azeri and Armenian criminal groups. Although these coalitions may be opportunistic, they transcend nationalities and offer a common Caucasian reference point. In so doing, they constitute a connective tissue for trans-state regionalism, frequently with the complicity of national bureaucracies: "[t]he Abkhaz Government in Exile, the Georgian Tax Department and Members of Parliament from Sagramelo owning petrol stations were singled out as providing support to groups involved in smuggling. Officials within the [Georgian] Ministry of Interior had stakes in drug and weapons smuggling, as well as kidnapping and extortion; senior officers of anti-drug departments were involved in trade of narcotics" (Prelz Oltramonti 2012: 13).

While these instances of fringe regionalism are characterised by networked configurations, there are also several interactions among non-state actors in the region that coalesce around physical infrastructures and geographic sites to provide the material foundations for regional connections. At the same time states endeavour to take control of and rule over these places. Open-air trading (and smuggling) markets have traditionally served as informal zones of peace in the Caucasus (Allen Nan et al. 2009), in particular the bazaars scattered along the Georgian borders such as Ergneti, Red Bridge and Sadakhlo markets, located on the borders with South Ossetia, Azerbaijan and Armenia respectively.

The Ergneti market has been a crucial place for people's diplomacy. In 1992, the Sochi/Dagomys Agreements defined a zone of conflict around Tskhinvali and established a security corridor along the administrative borderline. In the early 1990s, trade developed spontaneously on the neutral territory between Tskhinvali and the Georgian-controlled villages in Gori. Cross-border economic activities were mainly based on personal ties among mixed Georgian-Ossetian families. Within a few years, however, the Ergneti market became a regional transit centre as entrepreneurial activities expanded to involve people from different parts of Georgia, North Ossetia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Dagestan, and even Southern Russia's Rostov (Kalatozishvili 2012). Although Georgian authorities were not able to control the market, Ergneti was managed by networks

composed of Russians, Georgians and South Ossetians operating between Tskhinvali, South Ossetia and the Georgian regions of Shida Kartli and Kvemo Kartli. Trafficking and contraband via Ergneti were reportedly protected by, among others, Georgia's President Shevardnadze's nephew Nugzar, Minister of the Interior Koba Narchemashvili, and Shida Kartli Governor Davit Koblianidze. Lokha Chibirov, the son of the first President of South Ossetian and Liangi Chavchavadze, a former official of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, controlled the Ossetian and Georgian parts of the market respectively (Closson 2010). In the framework of an anti-smuggling operation launched by Saakashvili's government, the Ergneti market was closed in 2004 and the conflict zone militarised, with Georgian armed police moving into South Ossetia and setting up checkpoints (De Waal 2010: 199–202). Smuggling was simply diverted, however, not eliminated: rather, it changed "brokers". For example, in 2005, associates of the new governor of Shida Kartli, Mikheil Kareli, were accused of assisting a group of officials and their relatives in running contraband through South Ossetia, using Gori as a transfer point (Closson 2010).

The Sadakhlo and Red Bridge markets represent very similar examples, the epilogues of which lay in their respective closures in 2006 and 2007. The Sadakhlo market was located on Georgian territory, across the border from Armenia and not far from Azerbaijan, therefore occupying a region populated by Georgians, Azeris and Armenians: "Armenian nationals reached it through a gate guarded by Armenian and Georgian customs officers and border guards. Traders from Azerbaijan entered Georgia via the Krasny Most ("Red Bridge") border checkpoint" (Mirimanova 2006: 539). Red Bridge symbolised the unity of the South Caucasus in Soviet times: indeed, it was called the Bridge of Friendship and festivals of the peoples of the South Caucasus were held there. On the other hand, drug trafficking from the North Caucasus was facilitated by the peculiar location of the Red Bridge market: while physically on the Georgian side of the border, it was located under Azerbaijani jurisdiction as, "during the Georgian civil war in 1992, Azerbaijani forces occupied the marketplace and procured an agreement from Georgian authorities to 'lease' the territory of the market for 25 years" (Welt 2005). Beginning in 2005, both Georgian and Azerbaijani authorities established tighter regulations on border crossings bound for the Red Bridge Market and dispatched police officers to patrol the zone. Similarly to the Ergneti case, however, such measures have not curbed trans-border criminal activity. On the contrary, "fugitives or individuals not welcome in either Georgia or Azerbaijan

could freely 'disappear' to meet associates and buyers at the market. The presence of a small hotel on the territory of the bazaar permitted even extended stays in this 'no-man's land'" (Welt 2005).

It is worth mentioning that, in the case of the Ergneti market, this space of interchange, trade and trafficking has become a site of symbolic value. Since 2009, Ergneti has been the location of choice for holding regular meetings of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism in which Georgian and South Ossetian representatives discuss different conflict-related issues as well as problems affecting the communities living in the conflict zone, and exchange information (more than 80 meetings were organised from February 2009 to January 2018, co-facilitated by the OSCE and the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia, EUMM). Further, in 2013 the Confidence Building Early Response Mechanism (COBERM, a programme funded by the EU and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme, UNDP) supported a two-year project developed by the association "All Georgian Youth Union – Momavlis Tskhinvali (Tskhinvali of the Future)" for formally reviving the Ergneti market and engaging with the populations living in the border villages.[31]

Both the Sahara and the Caucasus are underpinned as examples of fringe regionalism through cross-border practices that defy conventional binaries. As a result of their marginal positions vis-à-vis the state and its national economies, nationalities in these places are blurred along with the formal or informal status of actors and the distinction between a border that hinders economic activity and one that facilitates it. Economically, the Caucasus and the Sahara are practiced as a one respective region.

3.3 Narratives of Belonging: Regions as Practiced Identities

Just as spatial practices and social relations are dialectically connected to spatial representations and geopolitical imaginaries (Lefebvre 1974), alternative cross-border identities arise from the informal commercial networks mentioned above and might end up challenging the legitimacy of state-based identifications. Identities are thereby directly linked to the previous subsections, as they provide legitimacy and support to specific delineations of the region and facilitate cross-border economic activities.

[31] Author's conversation with one of the project organisers, Marina Meshvildishvili (Tbilisi, July 2016).

In the Sahara Desert, criss-crossed by nomadic practices, power relations are essentially based not on territorial control but on access to the resources of a deterritorialised network, such as protection and social capital. Hence, none of the fundamental concepts of modern political thought, including citizenship, sovereignty and legitimacy, apply in a straightforward manner; in these spaces, they undergo a fundamental twist. In a context in which land abounds but labour force has usually been in short supply (Grémont 2012), power has traditionally been exerted and experienced more in terms of personal bonds and control over people than of territorial sovereignty over a bounded territory. It is the scope, extension and breadth of a person's social network that determine his/her social status. In contrast, the kind of isolation and inward-looking attitudes that have often been numbered among the attributes of state sovereignty according to the Westphalian tradition are seen as degrading and associated with social marginality. Within Arab genealogies, for instance, a well-branched family tree, distributed in space and deepened over time, is a key indicator of one's social prestige (Scheele 2012). Interestingly, a genealogical approach to identity significantly diverges from the abstract dichotomies of structural realism. From the latter's perspective, identities are based on bounded groups with the elements inside each group by definition identical to each other, and radical otherness separating the ones outside. Genealogies, instead, feature continuous linkages, not discrete sets. Positions within genealogies are individual, not collective; all the elements are virtually related to each other, no one is identical to anyone else, and differences are a matter of degree rather than radical partitioning.

The binary dichotomy of belonging and non-belonging, not to mention the introduction of the very concepts of citizen and foreigner, is the result of state practice (Mann 2014). Recent surveys conducted in the Saharan borderlands confirm that "people do not view themselves as citizens of a country, but more as members of specific sub- or trans-national social entities (kin, tribe, ethnicity or village). It is these entities that provide the nexus of order, security and basic social services" (Reitano and Shaw 2014: 9). Public goods thus stem not from national structures but from within the fringe regionalism. Furthermore, the creation of a rigidly bounded space – the delineations discussed in section 3.1 – can be seen locally as an arbitrary act of exclusion, and as a result transregional networks based on family and kinship often blur into those devoted to the extra-legal smuggling of different sorts of goods – the markets discussed in section 3.2. These networks often enjoy a greater degree of legitimacy

than the security apparatuses tasked with discontinuing such flows. Indeed, virtually all the available reports (Danish Demining Group 2014; IOM 2014; Reitano and Shaw 2014) confirm the widespread social legitimacy enjoyed by "contraband" related activities in the Saharan space. The security perceptions of communities interviewed in Saharan borderlands reiterate this view: "Unlike other communities, those living at the borders can procure any goods (including food, household appliances and clothes) through traffics. We are both served by Mali and its neighbour, Mauritania. We benefit from both cows' milk, whereas if you live inside a country, you buy all commodities at an exorbitant cost, since everything is imported in Mali, and therefore expensive. Mali and Mauritania are inseparable in our lives" (Sangaré 2016: 31).

It is certainly not by chance that, of the armed groups that have thrived in the Saharan region, the most resilient and powerful are precisely those that adopted names and brands boasting their regional coverage and boundary-straddling roots. The Movement for Oneness of Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) is a case in point: by celebrating a transcendent religious identity, the MUJAO managed to attract fighters from different ethnic groups and nationalities, reportedly including Mali, Mauritania, Algeria, Western Sahara, Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau and Senegal. Only a few months after being formed, the MUJAO had succeeded in taking control of north Mali's largest town, Gao, thereby demonstrating its successfulness vis-à-vis competing groups branding more traditional and localised identities. Another example is that of Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), whose name explicitly stresses the commonalities between the northern and southern shores of the Sahara, i.e. the Islamic "Maghreb" (which is neither North or South, but West, most notably vis-à-vis Mecca, thereby conveying an alternative regional imaginary and identity). Noteworthy, in August 2013 the MUJAO officially merged with an AQIM katibah to form a united organisation called Al-Mourabitoune, "the Almoravides", an explicit reference to the moor dynasty that ruled the western Sahara from Marrakesh to Timbuktu in the 12th century. Significantly, Al-Mourabitoune was led by the splinter AQIM emir Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a former cigarette smuggler (the source of his nickname 'Monsieur Marlboro') who had allegedly converted to the trans-Saharan trafficking of cocaine and weapons (Lacher 2012; Shaw and Tinti 2014). Recent research conducted in the region has found that one of the most prominent reasons for their success has been the propagation and concrete implementation of the ideology of without-borderism (Raineri

and Strazzari 2015), which holds that superseding post-colonial boundaries would help to propagate both sharia law and the free-trade economy of trafficking.

In March 2017, the federation of various insurgent armed groups in northern Mali, under the unified umbrella of Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM, Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims), further demonstrated the centripetal tendencies prevailing among local actors, in the face of the international community's increasing fragmentation. Since the outset, JNIM rhetoric has stressed its ambition to cut across national and ethnic divides, subsuming all sorts of differences under a common jihadist identity. And indeed, JNIM's constituency stretched widely across Saharan space. While commentators were initially surprised by the convergence of seemingly disparate groups under a common brand and leadership, we argue that our prism of analysis can contribute to unveiling the logics of connection and disconnection at play here. Certain ethnic-based networks are, in fact, disproportionately represented in the armed groups that formed the JNIM, namely the Arab, Tuareg and Fulani. Interestingly, anthropologists (Claudot-Hawad 1996) and historians (Hall 2013) have suggested that these ethnic groups share a cultural background featuring a deterritorialised understanding of power and sovereignty that has prevailed across the centuries. This border-less understanding is contradicted, however, by the territorialisation of political power which underlies state sovereignty and is shared by the dominant ethnic groups in Mali, such as the Bambara living south of the Sahara. In fact, in the Bambara cosmography the world is divided up into the space of the whites (*Fara Djela*) and space of the blacks (*Fara Fina*, i.e. Africa by extension). The Sahara Desert in between the two, where nomadic ethnic groups live and roam across the borders, is considered tantamount to an a-political wilderness. Within this narrative of congruence between race and territory, the Bambara language does not have the terms to classify Tuaregs (*peaux rouge*, the red-skinned) or Fulani (not-so-black-skinned), and indeed it lacks a specific political locus for them. While acknowledging that many different drivers have contributed to the formation of the JNIM, one could therefore frame this grouping as giving voice to all those who do not partake in the territorialisation of the Malian state and its firm rooting in Sahelian, not Saharan, space and spatial logics. Different spatial practices, thus, give birth to different spatial representations and foster the formation of alternative identity-markers.

All of these networks are divided by political, military and ethnic cleavages that occasionally feed more or less longstanding and more or less overt clashes in other localities; at the same time, however, they all seem to cooperate successfully and relatively peacefully in In-Khalil. "The point is that", a UN security officer working in Mali asserted, "the monopoly of one single criminal actor over the main supply chains and illegal markets would have economically adverse consequences, just as much as in the realm of legal markets. The whole community, but also the law enforcement and military apparatuses of the state, benefits from the commercial competition of the smugglers".[32] This unique admixture of rampant illegality, widespread availability of weapons and economic resources, deep-seated frustrations, sentiments of marginalisation and competing strategic imperatives creates an explosive cocktail the importance of which cannot be overestimated. Describing these areas as zones of indifference and weak interactions, as the framing of the Sahara Desert as a buffer zone suggests, would be certainly inaccurate.

Fringe narratives are also used to forge cross-border identities in opposition to national marginalisation in the Caucasus, where the artificial and top-down disjunction between North and South and supposedly isolating nature of the Caucasian mountains have often coexisted with other instances of region-building and regional connectivities driven by various actors. While geographic determinism would seem to limit mountains to hosting not only weak interplay but also war,[33] the area around the Caucasus is brimming with quite diverse imaginative geographies and projects have been pursued over time that contradict such an approach, instead confirming the epithet of "montagne des peuples" (Radvanyi 2002). On one side, there is the traditional idea of "Caucasian confederative unity" which has not, however, ever bridged the entire sub-region; on the other there is the "networked multiplex" made up of minorities and marginalised groups but also criminal assemblages and non-state/trans-state actors.

[32] Interview with intelligence officer from the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), conducted in Bamako, November 2014.

[33] For example, Zayats (2001, quoted from Radvanyi and Muduyev 2007: 158) has observed that "thirteen of the eighteen separatist wars in the contemporary world are localised in mountain areas," arguing that the predisposition to separatist violence can be explained on the basis of the geographic characteristics specific to these areas. Geographic determinism has become popular among Russian geographers and ethnographers in the wake of the work of Lev Gumilev.

In North Caucasus, the Union of Mountain Peoples and, later, the Mountain Peoples' Republic, only existed between 1917 and 1920.[34] However, in the late Soviet period, the idea of a North Caucasian republic was revived and embodied in the Congress of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, which then evolved into a Confederation. Nevertheless, the Confederation did not represent the same project of "Caucasiannes" for all components. According to its then-president, the Confederation was meant to integrate the peoples of the Caucasus rather than the official governments of the autonomous republics; in sharp contrast, the Chechen leadership considered Caucasian integration an instrument for achieving independence from Russia and aimed at establishing a Confederation of Caucasian states (Cem Oguz 2004).

In the South Caucasus, in the period in between the Russian Revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union, the three Transcaucasian nations formed the first Transcaucasian Federation, premised on the "Declaration of Independence and Sovereignty of the Transcaucasus" and separation from Russia. The Transcaucasian Federation lasted only one month, however, as each nationality went into the project with different perspectives, motivations and intentions. Nevertheless, the pathos of the failed struggle and regional identity of pan-Caucasianism have been one of the cultural paradigms[35] (Jones 2000) shaping Georgia's accounts of its role in the world since the end of the Soviet Union.

Georgia's first president, Gamsakhurdia, marked his leadership with a radical anti-Russian narrative and the support of "pan-Caucasianism", an alliance which emerged in part as a disillusioned reaction to Western "indifference" or "passivity" vis-à-vis the Georgian quest to achieve normalisation and "return" to the European family. Accordingly, in 1991, Gamsakhurdia promoted the concept of a common "Caucasian Home", a Caucasian Forum and alliance against foreign interference (Jones 2000). This facet of Caucasian regional cooperation was maintained during Shevardnadze's presidency as well, as the establishment of a Caucasian parliament and a permanent Coordinating Council of Caucasian governments was envisioned in 1996–1997 (Jones 2000). Pragmatism vis-à-vis Moscow resulted in the inclusion of Russia in some "would-be Pan-Caucasian initiatives": for example, in February 1996 Shevardnadze outlined the main

[34] The Mountain Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic then existed between 1921 and 1924.

[35] According to Jones (2000), cultural paradigms explain the role of national identity, traditional values and political culture in Georgia's foreign policy making.

principles that were to govern interstate relations among Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Russia ("Peaceful Caucasus Initiative"). Similarly, the Declaration in Support of Inter-Ethnic Harmony, Peace, and Economic and Cultural Cooperation in the Caucasus, which was adopted in Kislovodsk in June 1996 and explicitly defined the Caucasus as "a single, integral organism and a geopolitical reality", was signed by Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and Russia (Russo 2018).[36]

The realisation of the idea of Caucasianness and the Caucasian House has never gone beyond the declaratory level or imaginative projects advanced by experts and influential members of Georgian civil society.[37] However, a collection of interviews carried out in Tbilisi in April–June 2013 suggest that political and cultural elites in Georgia represent their country as part of an integrated space, in spite of a mainstream interpretation casting it as a fragmented region.

When asked about the role of their country at the regional and international level, the majority of respondents mentioned "South Caucasus" at first, referring to it as both a "natural space" and a "failed space" (given its conflict-proneness). South Caucasus emerged from the interviewees' replies as a geographical and social reality, regardless of politically-grounded regional groupings and formal institution-building projects.

[36] While some of these "Caucasian endeavors" remained inconsistent, contradictory and still "autochthonous" (i.e. in June 1997 Zurab Zhvania proposed an "Interparliamentary Assembly of the Caucasus"), others were promoted or initiated by non-Caucasian actors: early in 1999, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov proposed that a "Forum on the Caucasus" be convened, while in June 1999 a Caucasian Summit was held in Luxembourg under the aegis of the EU.

[37] Giorgi Khutsishvili has supported the idea of unification of the three states (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) and the three conflicting territories (Abkhazia, Tskhinvali and Karabakh) granting the latter a special status. Following Khutsishvili's vision, the Teqali Peace Center has been created in the province of Kvemo-Kartli, at the intersection of the borders among Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. The idea has been firstly discussed in Yerevan in February 2010 on the occasion of a meeting among civil society organisations entitled "South Caucasian Integration: Alternative Start"; the Tekali process premises on the commitment to actively involve frontline residents in the conflict transformation initiatives, among which there are public hearings – sponsored by the National Endowment for Democracy and implemented by the Armenian non-governmental organisations (NGO) Caucasian Center for Peace building Initiatives. Quite differently, Abkhazian historian and politician, Viacheslav Chirikba has suggested that the formation of common state by Georgia, the North Caucasian Republics of the Russian Federation, the federated Republic of Abkhazia-Apsny, South Ossetia and the Adjarian Republic should have been brought together in the framework of the pan-Caucasian union (Russo 2015).

Furthermore, it was depicted as a porous space, not so differentiated from Caucasus tout court and frequently related to Eastern Europe and to North Caucasus.

Several replies pointed to an imaginative construction of the South Caucasus as an "other-directed" process, a "perception based on outside-in socialisation" and an "international invention".[38] On the other hand, it was also identified with an attempt to peripherialise South Caucasian countries.[39] Interviewees' replies could have been ascribed to the resilience of "Soviet mental maps" among experts and policy-makers, and to a "post-colonial" conception of the self. In order to take into consideration the generational dimension, a set of online focus groups was arranged involving young people (under-35). The findings of the focus group confirmed a representation of South Caucasus in emotional rather than exclusively geopolitical terms, more as a space of nations/peoples that a group of states (Russo 2015, 2018).

Alongside these imaginative and often romanticised accounts of the Caucasian region, past and current patterns of radicalisation have revived linkages and connections between North and South Caucasus, and throughout the South Caucasus by means of diasporas and minorities (such as the Azerbaijani communities living in Georgia). In proximity to the Georgia-Chechnya border, the Pankisi Valley has been narrated (by international and local media as well as policy makers) since the early 2000s as a criminalised zone and safe haven for al-Qaeda cells and Chechen field commanders. In the wake of the Chechen Wars, refugees from Chechnya took shelter in the Pankisi Valley where co-ethnic Kists already resided, some of whom were relatives. The Pankisi Valley was also the principal site approved by the Georgian Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation for the settlement of refugees from Chechnya (Sanikidze 2007; Jasutis 2015). Until the mid-2000s, North Caucasian insurgent groups were also present and active in Azerbaijan, whose territories were used as a logistics base for supporting activities in the North Caucasus (for example, reportedly, the cities of Sumqayit Quba/Qusar, see Lonardo 2016). It is necessary to note, however, that evidence-based studies on radicalisation on the Caucasus are limited, and the information that does

[38] Interviews with a former member of different State Commissions and Georgian experts (Tbilisi, May 2013).

[39] Interviews with a Georgian expert and a former Georgian Minister (Tbilisi, May–June 2013).

circulate is often biased by attempts to justify weak schemes for countering violent extremism and disputable policies targeting minorities and specific ethnic and religious groups.

As practiced identities, the Sahara and the Caucasus reflect key elements of fringe regionalisms. Identity in these cases emerges from an overlap between an inclusive belonging to the desert or mountains of the regional space and an exclusive marginal position vis-à-vis formal state actors. This identity has the capacity to blend with some reference points, such as religion, and to supersede others, such as nationality or ethnicity. A cross-border identity of the fringes allows actors to resist external attempts to "divide et impera". The porous borders of this identity in spatial terms create space for transgressions and a gradual fading of one element into the other, instead of establishing sharp lines.

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CHAPTER 4

Towards a Wider Application of Fringe Regionalism: Comparisons and Transfers

Abstract Mattheis, Raineri and Russo take stock of the usefulness and limits of the fringe regionalism concept, providing a systematic comparison based on empirical studies of the Sahara and the Caucasus. The chapter argues that the concept of fringe regionalism can be transferred to other cases and illustrates this claim with reference to the Congo Basin in Central Africa and the Triple Border or Iguazu area between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay.

Keywords Comparative regionalism • Conceptual transfer • Congo Basin • Iguazu

The theoretical discussion in the second chapter pointed out a number of shortcomings in the literature on the production of regions and cumulated in proposing the concept of fringe regionalism. In the third chapter, this concept was applied to the Sahara and the Caucasus as a conceptual tool to identify and understand the informal transnational political spaces that emerge from the cross-border practices of non-state actors and informal institutions rooted in the peripheries of states. Building on the insights collected so far, this concluding fourth chapter uses fringe regionalism as a lens to understand the central role margins play in producing regions. This chapter concludes our contribution by wrapping up the results of the theoretical discussion and empirical analysis presented in the preceding

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chapters and discussing the wider relevance of fringe regionalism as a concept. In the first section, we outline the main gains and limitations of fringe regionalism as a concept. The second section is a systematic comparison based on the empirical study of the Sahara and the Caucasus. The third and last section argues that the concept of fringe regionalism can be transferred to other cases and illustrates this claim with reference to the Congo Basin in Central Africa and the Triple Border between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay.

4.1 Conceptual Gains and Limitations of Fringe Regionalism

The joint endeavour underlying this book seeks to mould and apply the concept of fringe regionalism as an exploratory analytical tool. Our overarching objective is to make an under-researched phenomenon visible by applying a new lens. These spectacles are rarely available in the toolbox of regionalism studies, but we have put them on here to study the way cross-border political processes shape regional spaces and orders. In other words, fringe regionalism is not a formalised entity that exists in social reality, like a regional organisation complete with headquarters, officials, bureaucrats, documents and summits. Rather, it is an analytical tool to capture the multifaceted texture of a region. Fringe regionalism is way of recalibrating our vision when looking at borderlands so that we might appreciate their existence as an instance of regionalism. Fringe regionalism enables us to see national demarcations as regional fragmentations, informal cross-border economies as integrative practices and multiple identities as a source of regional narratives. Fringe regionalism does not reject the importance of states and formal regional organisations; rather, it relegates them to the status of one actor among many. More often than not, the formal and the informal or the state and the non-state are intrinsically interwoven in the practices of fringe regionalism.

By understanding buffer zones and borderlands as regional connectors, we go beyond the generally taken-for-granted perception of these areas as marginal. Based on a study of the micro-regional dynamics of non-state actors and their spatial deployment in the Sahara Desert and in the Caucasus mountains, the previous chapter emphasised the idea that, in reality, buffer areas and regional borderlands shrug off this assumed peripheriality along with the disjunctive function they have been conventionally assigned. Although the Sahara and the Caucasus have both been

narrated and governed as buffers by external and national actors, neither space can be assigned a univocal geopolitical destiny. In particular, the notion of connectivity paves the way to the problematisation of the above-mentioned deterministic approach that equates deserts and mountains to zones of low interactions or natural barriers. In addition to challenging the "naturality/artificiality" dichotomy of borderlands, the argument we develop here is that peripheries cannot be dismissed as "ungoverned spaces" and indeed might trigger regionalising dynamics based on shadow infrastructures and practices of informality. Instead, borderlands such as the Saharan networked-city of In-Khalil and the Caucasian passes and informal markets can be conceived as fringe regionalisms. They thrive precisely because they are located beyond the reach of law enforcement agencies and the military. Borderlands offer the opportunity to accumulate resources and profits through networks of shadow economies, and this is precisely the structural factor that hinders any attempt to carry out meaningful border enforcement operations, whether performed by state agencies or by non-state armed actors attempting to build national-like sovereignties in break-away territories. Many actors have vested economic, political and social interests in maintaining and at the same time circumventing borders. However, smuggling networks and other shadow infrastructures located in the borderlands do not always have disintegrative effects that lead to the fragmentation of regional security complexes.

Far from representing pacific zones of weak interactions, fringe regionalisms challenge their alleged peripheriality by being at the core of interactional dynamics: "borders have moved from being merely the political edge of territory to being the middle of political space" (Balibar and Swenson 2003: 109). Structural pressures are increasingly exerted by state and non-state actors in efforts to extract profits and maximise the rents deriving from the erection and control of borders. We argue that the maintenance and systematic trespassing of state borders are in fact cornerstones of the political projects carried out by contemporary non-state and trans-state actors. This is particularly evident in poorly or selectively enforced state borders such as the ones that can be found in remote, difficult-to-access locations that lay beyond the reach of state apparatuses for geographic, social and ethnic reasons. Fringe regionalisms situated in borderlands therefore acquire an unprecedented political significance. As Korf and Raeymaekers (2013: 5) argue, "border regions also implicitly and explicitly call into question the legitimacy of states and their pretences to control an illusionary cartography of territory and population".

Our conceptualisation efforts have built on ideas and insights from disciplinary fields whose connection to regionalism deserves to be rediscovered. In addition to critical geopolitics, we have drawn on post-colonial studies, aiming to contribute to the decentring agenda while also shedding light on the processes of peripherialisation and exclusion that "marginal" and "remote" areas undergo. These processes can be problematised by reconsidering regional agencies in the borderlands. Further, we have enrolled categories and approaches from comparative historical sociology in order to critically question the centrality and normality of the Weberian state. The role of this state ideal as "regionalism's 'gatekeeper' and, as such, the most vital and enduring reference point in the practice and regulation of regionalism" (Fawcett 2013: 5–6) calls out for a critical reassessment. From this perspective, fringe regionalism should not be considered as a pathology of international politics. Rather than being relegated to the role of tribal oddity, fringe regionalism serves to uncover a dynamic that is found in most region-building processes where national governments are not the only actors involved. Indeed, we argue that the dynamics observed through the lens of fringe regionalism reveal the constitutive potential of producing regions in terms of resistance, contestation and emancipation.

At the same time, however, it is exactly the observation of those dynamics that sets some limits on systematic and comparative studies informed by the notion of fringe regionalism. Our exploration has been driven by the assembly of scattered data and an aggregate of material resulting from fieldwork research and site-intensive inquiries. Our comparative attempt has not stemmed from the a priori conception of a focused and structured design. Rather, we have adopted an abductive approach that "abandons the solid ground of prediction and testing in order to introduce a new idea or to understand a new phenomenon" (Bude 2004: 322). Having let the data guide our conceptualisation attempts, we engaged in building the concept of fringe regionalism by juxtaposing and contrasting case studies. The complex dialogue between area studies and self-reflexive and comparative approaches is not without its share of contradictions to be solved and gaps to be filled (Ahram et al. 2018; Middell 2013). In this respect, looking at additional case studies through the lens of fringe regionalism is a necessary step to refine the concept and consolidate its comparative perspective, and in the last section of this chapter we suggest some avenues for moving in this direction.

The meaningful application of fringe regionalism as an analytical tool is further limited by its central requirements. The uncovering of instances of fringe regionalism relies on a spatial tension between borders that are established by nation states and/or their regional organisations on the one side, and cross-border practices and identities on the other side. Without the existence of such a tension, the concept is likely to be of limited value. As a consequence, the concept retains a degree of state-centrism, as it requires the involvement of states as actors, albeit not in a simplistic Weberian reading. In fringe regionalisms, centralised states are able to demarcate borders but not to exercise full control over the borderlands: they are neither all-powerful nor entirely absent. If political borders were to entirely disappear in the Sahara or the Caucasus, the latter would most likely continue to exist as relevant geographical, economic and social spaces and identities. However, fringe regionalism would become less relevant for understanding and explaining them.

By virtue of including the state and its borders, however, fringe regionalism also contributes to addressing another major bias in regionalism studies, namely Eurocentrism (in particular EU-centrism). In this book, the concept of fringe regionalism has initially been applied outside of Europe and its application thus contributes to strengthening the attention granted to other world regions. However, fringe regionalism is not explicitly designed as a concept specific to non-European contexts. Rather, we suggest that by transferring the concept to Europe, cross-border dynamics that have received scant attention in regionalism studies might be better discerned. Such a future endeavour would help to produce new knowledge about the nature of the relationship between the EU and fringe regionalism.

In sum, the lens of fringe regionalism enables us to identify our cases in terms of connectivity rather than fragmentation. A main strength of the concept is that it highlights how forms of regionalism emerging from the fringes take advantages of the peripheral position they are assigned to vis-à-vis the state. Although fringe regionalism relies on the state as part of its concept, it takes a critical stance towards the state's predominant position in terms of region-building. There are two elements, however, that the lens of fringe regionalism has left relatively blurry: comparative perspectives and a recalibration that would enable us to look at more cases. The next two sections seek to chart a way forward.

4.2 Comparative Fringe Regionalism

Formal regionalism has been associated with regional organisations that determine the territory and policies of a region via a centralised form of institution. These organisations create a layering of international agreements and policy procedures meant to facilitate and manage cross-border practices. Using fringe regionalism as a lens to examine our cases has allowed us to uncover region-building dynamics that other concepts of regionalism would not have captured or would have relegated to a marginal consideration. Applying this lens also helps to highlight three constitutive elements: borders/boundaries, practices and identities. The two in-depth case studies discussed in the previous chapter further allow us to draw a number of comparative conclusions and, in so doing, to establish recurrent dynamics across the two regions as well as variations and thus the gamut of fringe regionalism.

Firstly, with respect to borders/boundaries, the cases illustrated how a geographic space is demarcated and fragmented. Although both the Sahara and the Caucasus contain important characteristics of a political, social and economic region, geopolitical discourses reimagine both areas as buffer zones or piecemeal territories. Rivalries between states of the region, hegemonic aspirations and an external imperial logic of "divide et impera" all propose delineations that serve their own purposes. They cut across the map to establish a balance of power or to define spatial divisions that are considered compatible with states' aspirations and capacities, on one hand, and with the alleged geopolitical "fate" of specific territorial configurations, on the other hand. In line with any given delineation, certain existing connections within the region are elevated while others are negated or framed as illegal. Nevertheless, since both the Caucasus and the Sahara have important characteristics of regions, they constitute a reference point for numerous actors and imaginations. By virtue of existing as regions, the Caucasus and the Sahara constitute social, economic and political entities that can be exploited for geopolitical, ideological or other purposes. This exploitation leads to delineations that claim to be pan-regional, in this case Trans-Saharan or Trans-Caucasian, but which actually follow a logic of region-building through exclusion. States or political movements propose a predefined, fixed definition of who/what is part of the Sahara or Caucasus and who/what not. The complex composite of territory, functional linkages, ethnicity, religion, kin and other spatialising elements ends up being simplified, however, and only those elements that

coincide with the interests of the driving actors are emphasised while others are downplayed or ignored.

Nonetheless, these should be considered rigid ontologies that offer only a limited, partial, and in our view insufficient account of agency potential and existing dynamics of region-making. The cases illustrated in this book exhibit significant variety in the ways border-lines are drawn. Some claim to carry forward a historic, colonial or territorial legacy, others serve geopolitical interests and yet others – such as the former Soviet areas – reflect the phantom limb pain of former integration. There is a mutually reinforcing instrumental relationship between selected external delineations and local separatist movements that take advantage of each other's existence. By contrast, demarcations based on functional divisions are rare in these two cases.

Some of the competing spatial delineations converge and intensify fragmentations, as in several actors pursuing the division between North and Sub-Saharan Africa or between North and South Caucasus. And yet they often envisage shapes which are incongruous and must be negotiated, generating conflict about who is included and who is excluded when dealing with the Sahara or the Caucasus. However, the exercise of dissecting a region does not lead to the erection of hermetic borders. Although a multitude of borders run through both the Sahara and the Caucasus, they remain porous. What and who is able to transgress the borders and under what conditions depends on both how states formally handle demarcations and practices within the fringe regionalism in question.

Secondly, with respect to fringe regionalism as practiced economies (both legal and extra-legal), their marginal location vis-à-vis centralised state authorities is coupled with the existence of borders that are perceived as arbitrary and easy to transgress. This combination makes it easier to outlaw existing economic activities based on established cross-border connections or regional consumption patterns. It also facilitates the emergence of new illicit patterns. Local informal actors, often in coalition with state actors, adapt to delineations that place them in a marginal position. They quickly take advantage of their peripheral location and the existence of borders. Smuggling is one economic activity that benefits to a particularly high degree from borders that separate different legal regimes, have a porous character and are distant from state control. This includes the smuggling of licit and illicit goods, as well as migrants.

The more borders become a pillar for revenue generation, the stronger a stand local actors are likely to take against the dismantling of borders, as

often proposed by intergovernmental organisations. A veritable common market would nullify the competitive advantage of those who are capable of circumventing the border, evening out differences in price and availability on both sides of the border. The borders that permeate fringe regionalism are fragmentary and can clash with formal regional integration, especially when the latter aims to dismantle internal borders, often in conjunction with sealing external ones. A similar dynamic can be observed in relation to infrastructure. The difficulties involved in crossing the Sahara or the Caucasus add a premium to smuggling activities and thus roads and other physical connectors, as promoted by large-scale programme of formal regional organisations and regional development banks, can facilitate such movement as long as economic actors are able to establish a degree of control over the use of such infrastructure.

The economic practices that underpin fringe regionalism in the Sahara and the Caucasus defy conventional binaries of formal and informal actors, state and non-state actors, and centre and periphery. In these spaces the elites who occupy formal state roles often engage in informal activities while non-state actors perform formal functions. As a result, borderlands become economic centres of the marginalised region. In these informal/formal, state/non-state coalitions, nationality and ethnicity are less of a distinction than is access to border porousness. The central state unfolds in an ambivalent way. On one side, it has an intrinsic desire to control and formalise its border; on the other side, it grants political or administrative status to its elites, status they can capitalise on by calibrating policing measures in favour of neopatrimonial borderland networks and patronage politics. Although borders still do represent an obstacle to many actors in the economic daily practices of fringe regionalism, in these areas they can be more readily ignored, instrumentalised or exploited.

Thirdly, with respect to fringe regionalism as practiced identities, borderlands create the conditions for a complex overlapping of forms of belonging, frames, and narratives. Rather than being subject to a dominant reference point of nationality, varying intensities of ethnicity, location, religion, kin and other reference points foster alternative identifications and polarisations which merge with complex regional identities and imaginaries. Although in some instances one of these reference points can prevail over others, the general complexity undermines clear lines of exclusion and inclusion. Being part of the Sahara or the Caucasus is a construction that does not stop abruptly; rather, it fades out gradually. This conception contrasts with the attempts by nation states to generate congruence

between territory on the one side and nationality on the other, in some cases involving language and ethnicity. Although location and physical proximity do matter, the Sahara and the Caucasus are not sealed identity containers; they are reference points that people across the region are able to identify with. As with other identities, fringe regionalism also refers to an idealised imagination, the physical nature of which can be reimagined, expanded or contracted. Similarly, identity is also defined by the sheer sense of belonging to the fringes and being remote from the centre and the state. The pathos of marginalisation and subjugation, combined with failed region-building experiences in the past, often creates a collective identity. However, new, externally imposed delineations and economic practices can fundamentally change this perception and create new centre-periphery hierarchies within borderlands. Beyond the abstraction of political and jurisdictional categories, then, the fact that borderlands are inhabited and can perform connective functions between different micro-regions blurs the boundaries of identities and the rigid dichotomies of identifications, inclusion and exclusion that underpin national and regional narratives.

In sum, the lens of fringe regionalism has firstly enabled us to conceive of the Caucasus and the Sahara as regionalisms and secondly allowed for a cross-check of its constitutive elements: borders/boundaries, economic practices and identities. Although the cases offer significant variation and context-specificity, they both portray regions which are defined through national fragmentations, borderland economies and multi-layered identity formation. In both cases, seemingly antagonistic elements (competing borderlines, informal and formal economic actors, ethnicity and other reference points) not only coexist but actually constitute the multi-layered fabric of the fringe regionalism in question. In the same vein, the negative narrative of fringe regionalism (absence of control, illicit activities) is mirrored by a positive narrative (integration of peripheral communities, the free movement of people and goods).

4.3 The Relevance of Fringe Regionalism Beyond the Caucasus and the Sahara

The cases of the Sahara and the Caucasus have illustrated the applicability of the lens of fringe regionalism in uncovering the region-making dynamics that emerge from the margins of nation states. In these two cases the move to investigate the cross-border metropolitanisation of the margins

or, in other words, to place the periphery at the centre, has revealed their existence as relevant political, economic and social regions. The concept of fringe regionalism enables us to recognise regions that are otherwise not easily classifiable or consensually acknowledged as regions.

Fringe regionalism therefore has the ambition to be applicable to cases beyond the two investigated here in detail. As an analytical tool, fringe regionalism serves as a lens to highlight spaces that have been delineated as peripheries but also constitute cross-border regions. Of course, not all borderlands and peripheries entail a fringe regionalism, and instances of fringe regionalisms may come in different shapes and degrees of intensity. Some might be ephemeral, others of a long-standing nature. And while all fringe regionalisms can be expected to display aspects belonging to the three areas analysed in Chap. 3, some spaces might be well-developed in terms of one of these areas (economic practices, for instance) but comparatively less active in terms of others (identity, for instance). These characteristics can be further used to internally refine the category of fringe regionalism.

The applicability of the fringe regionalism lens is particularly promising in post-colonial or post-imperial contexts. Where demarcation and fragmentation have been driven by external actors, the overlap between outsiders' imaginaries and existing spatial reference points produces fertile grounds for the emergence of fringe regionalism. This tension between overlapping delineations can be exacerbated by the distance between capitals and peripheries and by physical locations that make it challenging for the place in question to be brought under imperial or national control: deserts and mountain ranges but also forests, valleys or island chains.

Fringe regionalism should not be considered a concept whose applicability it limited to the Global South. Independentist movements in Europe suggest that the current national containers of several states are also contested, including for instance Austria, Cyprus, Kosovo, Spain and the United Kingdom. However, fringe regionalism is only partly applicable to separatism that occurs predominantly inside a state and does not have a cross-border, regional scope. Hence, fringe regionalism is more likely to be found in the Balkans than in Corsica.

In order to foster thinking about how the concept of fringe regionalism might be transferred to other spaces, we present two further cases as a means of highlighting the value of studying such cases and others with respect to their function of building regions from the margins. The first is the Congo Basin fringe regionalism in Central Africa, which involves a

longer temporal trajectory and is driven primarily by identity-oriented practices. The second case is the Iguazu region, or Triple Border, at the intersection of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, which represents a shorter temporal trajectory and is driven primarily by economic practices.

Central Africa is usually considered the least integrated region in the continent based on economic, political and social indicators (UNECA 2017). It also lacks a regional hegemon and the authority and performance of intergovernmental regional organisations is very limited (Mattheis 2017). Some scholars find it hard to consider Central Africa a region at all, and have classified it as a buffer zone (Buzan and Wæver 2003: 243–244) dividing, more than connecting, different regions. Topographically, it is characterised by the Congo Basin, the second largest tropical forest in the world.

Beyond the activities of political elites and administrations under the umbrella of formal organisations, there are clear hints that the area is also an instance of fringe regionalism. There are extended informal trade, finance and migration networks extending across borders and generally evading the reach of states (MacGaffey 1991; Dramani 2011). While official figures for trade and investment paint the portrait of a disintegrated region, there are important ethnic, linguistic and cultural linkages that provide the basis for informal cross-border economic exchanges (Bennafla 2002). For instance, since the 1930s the Fang ethnic group has contested the colonial borders that divide their community, notably with the Congress of Mitzic in 1947. Although the Fang have not yet succeeded in forging a new configuration that would transcend colonial borders, their continued existence generates a cross-border movement of goods and people (Alexandre and Binet 2005; Mba-Abessole 2006).

In addition, illicit regional economic practices take place in the Congo Basin involving formal actors such as military, economic and political elites and informal activities revolving around coltan, diamonds and money laundering (United Nations 2002; Dzaka-Kikouta 2005). Border cities and harbours across the region serve as hubs for goods and services as well as local and foreign criminal actors (Daubrée 1994). These instance of fringe regionalisms operate independently of formal regional organisations, although intergovernmental projects to improve infrastructure and facilitate trade can serve the interests of informal cross-border actors (Ranganathan and Foster 2011). A common currency shared by six countries in the region, the Financial Cooperation in Central Africa (CFA) Franc, facilitates financial and economic exchanges but at the same time

reduces the economic opportunity border actors would have to make a profit off currency exchange.

The Congo Basin is a region that harbours numerous violent conflicts, all of which entail cross-border elements. In the war in Central African Republic, both sides – the ex-Séléka and Anti-Balaka groups alike – draw on cross-border narratives for asserting their legitimacy. Opportunities for cross-border activities foster opportunism and network-building, thereby contributing to the establishment of an informal regional economy that includes kidnapping and resource exploitation at a regional scale. The religious ideology-fuelled war over the political system that pits several governments in the region against each other, including Cameroon and Chad on one side and the Boko Haram group on the other, also involves a regional dimension in that it is framed through a narrative that transcends national and ethnic borders. At the same time, maritime security is becoming an increasingly relevant regional issue in the face of increasing rates of transnational piracy. Indeed, a specialised intergovernmental organisation, the Commission of the Gulf of Guinea, has been revived and tasked with tackling regional security issues (Atonfack Guemo 2010: 140).

External actors such as France and the United Nations have responded to these conflicts by targeting national governments in the region. Although some of these responses occur at the regional level, such as joint forces and mediation processes, they primarily rely on the continuity of existing borders. Wars that involve non-state actors with a cross-border dimension, such as the ongoing conflict in the Central African Republic, have therefore caused tensions among the neighbouring countries of Chad and Cameroon, which took opposite sides in the internal conflict (Meyer 2011). At the same time, the Multi-National Joint Task Force faces new challenges in its fight against Boko Haram because the terrorist group is increasingly dispersed among the small islands of the non-demarcated area of the Lake Chad (i.e. at the border, according to the way Central African regional organisations demarcate the region). This development clearly illustrates how new agencies and alternative patterns of territorialisation defy the security governance of conventional regional organisations.

In sum, the Congo Basin in Central Africa combines a clearly marginal position with recurrent regionalising tendencies. Although there is no dominant regional narrative, the various cross-border identities foster regional practices and vice-versa.

The Triple Border (*triple frontera* in Spanish or *triplice fronteira* in Portuguese), also called the Iguazu region, is an example of fringe region-

alism that diverges from that of the Congo Basin in that the densification of the Triple Border region has been concentrated over a shorter period of time and its economic practices take precedence over identity. The Triple Border refers to the point of convergence of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, stretching along the Parana and Iguazu rivers that flow into massive waterfalls and hydropower plants. The heart of the Triple Border is constituted by a triangle of three cities connected by the bridges that span these rivers: Ciudad del Este in Paraguay, Foz do Iguazu in Brazil and the smaller Puerto Iguazu in Argentina.

The term Triple Border emerged in the mid-1990s to refer to the region as a lawless territory outside the control of national capitals, a space in which illicit activities flourished (Rabossi 2008). As such, the name is less a regional identity and more an external denomination used to delineate a space that was primarily perceived as a problem (Montenegro y Giménez Béliveau 2006). The Triple Border has also generated a somewhat romantic imaginary of a space in which anything is possible, a "South American version of Casablanca in the 1940s" (Lyman and Potter 2015).

Criminal interests converged to clear the Triple Border of state-led interference in order to more freely pursue illicit trafficking, chiefly in drugs, arms and humans, as well as counterfeiting and money laundering. The fringe regionalism created in its wake proved to be quite enduring, resisting external intervention by governments, international organisations and even specialised task forces. A multitude of external actors overlap and converge in the Triple Border, including Chinese, Korean, Russian, Italian and Nigerian organised crime groups (Lyman and Potter 2015). This convergence reinforces the idea that its regionalism has been constructed from outside, although local organised crime groups have also flourished and taken part in the bartering among them (e.g. exchanging arms for drugs). Depending on the nature of their activities, the Triple Border connects illicit goods from the Andes to Sao Paulo and Buenos Aires and beyond, and vice-versa. The Triple Border garnered international attention, in particular from the US, because it was narrated as a "black hole", a secluded den in which terrorist acts and crimes were committed with impunity (Zinno 2008). This attention was fuelled by the existence of a large Arab minority in the Triple Border as well as the fact that some organised crime groups were allegedly linked to the economic and financial activities of Islamic groups, chiefly Hizbollah (Hudson 2010).

Although largely located in the informal sector, the economic practice of fringe regionalism in the Triple Border has not been facilitated solely by lax state control; such practices also stem from traditional, formal partnerships in the private and public sectors. The Initiative for the Integration of the Regional Infrastructure of South America and the establishment of Ciudad del Este as a free trade zone provided favourable physical and legal conditions that organised crime groups were perfectly positioned to exploit. Fringe regionalism here has thus benefited from formal regional agreements – as supported by intergovernmental regional organisations such as Mercosur – as much as from informal partnerships and arrangements to promote open markets for illicit activities.

In the dominant external spatial narrative of the Triple Border, the illicit character of practices has largely negated other region-building aspects, including crucial cross-border activities such as tourism and energy; at the same time, however, this narrative focused on illegality also gave rise to local efforts to assert a counter-narrative as a region-building exercise. This cross-border practice was driven in particular by the Brazilian and Paraguayan population of Arab descendant, most of whom had settled in the area since the 1950s and worked as small-scale merchants. They initiated a movement called "Peace without Frontiers" that organised mass gatherings to promote a border identity inclusive of ethnic, national and religious differences (Tofik Karam 2011). Part of the move to reclaim the region consisted of replacing the term Triple Border with Iguazu region. This reframed identity also resonated with local administrations that rejected the idea that the space they governed was lawless and had already established multiple formal frameworks for mutual cooperation (Rhi Sausi and Oddone 2013). In the end, however, the glue holding together this common identity lies largely in reacting to external narratives that use the region as a bogeyman. It is uncertain, therefore, whether such an identity could bridge the major antagonisms among the population of the Triple Border, antagonisms that follow not lines of nationality or religion so much as lines of difference between, for instance, large-scale soy farmers and indigenous peasants (Fogel 2008).

Similar types of fringe regionalism can be found in other tri-national settings in South America, such as the Colombia-Peru-Ecuador and the Colombia-Venezuela-Brazil border regions, where central governments have as a rule maintained a limited presence, intergovernmental partnerships have facilitated both licit activities and organised crime, and external conceptions precede local narratives of regionness.

The cases of the Congo Basin and Triple Border suggest that the lens of fringe regionalism can be meaningfully applied to other cases as well, beyond the in-depth studies addressed in this book. Not only can it shed light on other instances of peripheral region-building, it can also serve to bring together and systemise a larger variety of cases. Uncovering the differences between such cases in terms of their constitutive elements, such as temporality – sequence and drivers – contributes to a richer understanding while also making it possible to consider them in relation to formal intergovernmental regionalism.

Although our contribution makes a case for understanding fringe regionalism as a phenomenon emerging from practices at the margins of other constructed delineations, it does not intend to draw a line excluding scholars focusing on regionalism as a centralised and planned process of emerging institution-building. Rather, a larger debate on the delineations, practices and narratives of regionalism is intended to reconcile these divergent points of departure. By building on a pluralistic ontology, fringe regionalism offers bridges to synthesise a broader understanding of regionalism as a social process that can be initiated by both centres and peripheries and is likely to generate a reaction on the other side. Our argument is not limited to overturning conceptual optics and suggesting that peripheries can be centres of region-building and that political capitals can end up marginalised as part of processes in which fringes become more important than centres. We like to think that – just as Saharans cross the desert and Caucasians cross the mountains – it would behove scholars of regionalisms to transgress fixed binaries in order to appreciate the actual extent of the regions they are looking at.

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