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Beyond Eurocentrism: Globalising and Decentring Research on Micro-Regional Cross-Border Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

Research on cross-border micro-regionalism has proliferated in the last three decades. Much of this research is undertheorized and Eurocentric in outlook. Addressing this problem, our article follows calls to establish a Global International Relations research perspective that also incorporates non-Western cultural traditions and historical trajectories in theory building. We demonstrate that Hooghe and Marks's multi-level governance framework, while widely regarded as the dominant theoretical approach to studying cross-border cooperation (CBC) in Western Europe, proves significantly less applicable when extended beyond the European context. We argue that in combination with Comparative Area Studies approaches, reconciling cognitive and material perspectives may better accommodate non-Western CBC and identify Analytic Eclecticism and Practice Theory as promising avenues for a global, but at the same time decentred, theory-building on CBC. Methodologically, we opt for inductive and abductive qualitative approaches and Qualitative Comparative Analysis.

Introduction

In the 1990s, cross-border cooperation (CBC), often categorised as a variant of micro-regionalism, proliferated in Europe. Around the same time, CBC schemes also sprung up in the Americas, Asia and Africa. CBC has since become a global phenomenon and a dimension of an increasingly vertically and horizontally differentiated global governance architecture (Rüländ 2010).

Micro-regions can be subdivided into two types: those that are 'purely subnational', that is, located *within* the jurisdiction of a nation state, and those that are of a *border-crossing* nature, establishing and facilitating CBC (Söderbaum 2004). Markus Perkmann (2003, 156) seminally defined micro-regional CBC as 'a more or less institutionalised collaboration between contiguous subnational authorities across national borders'. This implies that

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cross-border micro-regions are (mainly) composed of sub-national territorial units (Söderbaum 2004). Examples are the Euroregions in Western Europe, the growth polygons in Southeast Asia, the Cascadia region in Northern America and the Maputo Development Corridor (MGC) in Southern Africa. The key drivers of CBC are mostly government authorities at varying levels. Where non-governmental actors are the main proponents of cross-border activities, such as in North America and, to a lesser extent, South America, the literature speaks of micro-regionalisation (Breslin and Hook 2002, 13).

In the last three decades, research on micro-regionalism and CBC has produced a burgeoning literature, albeit often undertheorized and insulated from the study fields of comparative regionalism with its emphasis on macro-regional integration and its links to sub-types of regionalism.¹ As by far the largest number of CBC schemes have been established in Europe,² unsurprisingly, existing theory-guided CBC research has become strongly Eurocentric. We define theories guiding CBC as Eurocentric when they are applicable primarily within a European context and implicitly or explicitly project European experiences as globally relevant. These theories elevate Europe to the benchmark for CBC development, imbuing European CBC practices with an exceptionalist stature that suggests that they set the standard to which other world regions should aspire. Emblematic in this respect is Basboga's (2020, 15) statement that European CBC experiences 'carry a lot of value for policy makers from all around the world' because they represent 'the first of its kind in view of its large-scale implementation for relatively a long time'.

The objective of this article is to stimulate a critical debate on how CBC research can overcome its largely case-based and descriptive Eurocentric orientation and advance to a theoretically guided, cross-regionally studied phenomenon of global governance. Hence we follow calls for a Global International Relations research perspective (Acharya 2014) which we combine with the Comparative Area Studies approach (Ahram, Köllner, and Sil 2018). The latter's focus on cross-regional comparison conceives CBC as a global phenomenon and decentres knowledge that tends to universalise Western experiences and ignore regional variation.

In the following section, we start by arguing that the explanatory scope of the analytical framework which inspires many theory-guided studies, Hooghe and Marks's multi-level governance approach, is suitable for studying CBC in Western Europe, but unable to adequately explain CBC outside (Western) Europe. Their focus on scalarity is of limited analytical value where, like in non-Western regions, there is an absence of supranational regional integration, local governance authorities are weak and state-controlled interest representation strongly curtails the space for vertical policy processes. In the section thereafter, we suggest that due to their greater context sensitivity, approaches combining cognitive and material perspectives can better accommodate non-Western CBC. We posit that – complying with this requirement – analytic

eclecticism (Sil and Katzenstein 2010) and practice theory (Adler and Pouliot 2011) provide particularly promising avenues towards truly global CBC research. Both approaches are amenable to qualitative methodologies including Qualitative Comparative Analysis (Ragin 1987, 2009) as well as inductive and abductive methods. In the final section, we summarise the article's findings and provide a cursory outlook on future research.

The Eurocentrism of Multi-Level Governance and Scularity Approaches

The theoretical foundations of CBC research are underdeveloped, as evidenced by the critiques of several scholars, including Yoder (2003, 91), Popescu (2008, 19) and Sendhardt (2013, 21). Their analyses underscore a significant gap in the theoretical rigour applied within this field of study. As a research theme dominated by geographers and characterised by 'the bewildering variety' in format, size, practices and functions (Sohn 2018, 308), authors rarely use theories of International Relations or comparative regionalism as frameworks that could significantly enhance its analytical scope, depth and precision. More often, they produce heuristics such as typologies and classifications of CBC schemes (for examples, see Brunet-Jailly 2005; De Sousa 2013; Dilla, Cabezas, and Figueroa 2022; Sohn 2014; Villanueva, Kidokoro, and Seta 2023). Quantitative studies searching for drivers of CBC are only weakly linked to theoretical premises (see, *inter alia*, Basboga 2020; Castanho et al. 2018) and leave open questions such as: Why these variables and not others? How are the variables weighted? How can their relevance be assessed? And how can mutual influences be measured?

Perkmann's comment (Perkmann 2003, 165) that '... any "general theory" [of CBC] must be rejected as mechanistic and ahistorical' since 'institutional factors will prevent [it] from being applied to other areas such as North America or Southeast Asia' perhaps best epitomises the widespread aversion to grand theories in research on CBC. Other prominent CBC scholars such as Van Houtum (2000) and Paasi (2011) share his scepticism with similar arguments. While Perkmann's observation at least reflects a modicum of sensitivity to cross-regional contextual variations, the implicit assumption of his statement that theory building is only possible if other regions meet the European gold standard is typical of the widespread Western-centrism of theorising in social sciences.

Many CBC studies with links to the theoretical literature on regionalism refer to Hooghe and Marks's (2003) multi-level governance approach (Moisio and Paasi 2011, 7). In developing their approach, Hooghe and Marks draw strongly from the post-Cold War literature on globalisation and global governance, positing a hollowing out of the (nation) state (Ohmae 1995) and a rescaling of state spaces upwards, downwards and sideways (Sohn 2018, 302). The proponents of this

literature argue that globalisation transforms the Westphalian state: while borders become increasingly permeable (Gualini 2003, 49), the ensuing trans-border problems compel the central state to share competences and resources with new (non-state) actors (Harguindéguy and Sanchez 2017, 3).

This segmentation of governance competences is particularly evident in European cross-border regions. Adherents of the multi-level governance approach thus regard the European Union as the laboratory *par excellence* for these emerging new forms of governance, where governance structures range from the supranational regional level down to the sub-national local level and involve an increasing number of non-state actors (Basboga 2020, 4; Blatter 2003, 505; European Commission 2021 Nadalutti, Ramirez, and Medeiros 2023). Most of these analyses are greatly informed by the precepts of liberalism and a seemingly emerging post-Cold War Liberal International Order (Ikenberry 2011).

Responding to these changes, Hooghe and Marks distinguish two types of governance: ‘Type one’ in which territorial general-purpose governance is vertically and hierarchically structured in a nested set of jurisdictions. And ‘type two’, which primarily denotes functional governance and is fragmented, issue specific, flexible, not nested, overlapping and temporary (Hooghe and Marks 2003, 236).

While at first sight the multi-level governance approach seems to be a suitable framework for analysing changing governance processes, especially in the European Union, a closer view suggests that it only conceptualises the re-scaling of governance in Western Europe.³ In the Eastern European accession states, the multi-level governance approach fails to adequately capture the actual layering of governance. Eastern European states, only recently freed from four decades of subservience to Soviet hegemony, jealously guard their newly won foreign policy autonomy and only reluctantly accept supranationality as one of the European Union’s core norms. Unsurprisingly, thus, regarding porous borders as a security threat, central governments play a much greater role than in Western Europe as gatekeepers of CBC (Nadalutti and Rüland 2024, 10). Hungary is even suspected of (ab)using CBC tools such as Interreg and the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation for nationalist and irredentist objectives (Scott and Haidu 2022). But in Western Europe, too, the dream of a ‘borderless Europe’ has encountered setbacks. Mass (irregular) migration, the COVID-19 pandemic and right-wing populism initiated a re-bordering process (Medeiros et al. 2021) that revived the borders’ security function and deprived seeming ‘de-statization’ trends (Blatter 2004, 531) of their inherent teleological optimism.

The multi-level governance approach’s apparent limitations in capturing the historical and cultural specifics of Eastern European states foreshadow even greater challenges in applying this framework globally. As in all world

regions outside Europe, intergovernmental norms of cooperation seek to constrain the effects of globalisation such as the creeping de-nationalisation of statehood and central governments to varying degrees curtail the vertical layering of trans-border governance.

While in North America, perhaps even more than in Europe, globalisation boosted transboundary economic interactions, CBC emerging along the borders of the United States with Canada and Mexico (Blatter 2001, 2004; Brunet-Jailly 2022; Capellano, Richardson, and Trautman 2021; Dupeyron 2008; Grimes 2002) only remotely resembles Hooghe and Marks's 'type one' governance. The North American Free Trade Agreement may have fostered CBC (Blatter 2002, 263; Chen 2005, 232; Grimes 2002, 25), but as a regional organisation without supranational competences, it is – unlike the European Union – not involved in CBC. Moreover, as interaction between the federal governments and local authorities is feeble and controlled by the centre (Ganster and Collins 2017, 499; Grimes 2002, 24), aggravated by US border securitisation after 9/11 (Ganster and Collins 2017, 500; Herzog and Sohn 2019, 181), multi-level governance is asymmetrical and limited to domestic policy processes. This is exacerbated by the fact that sub-national authorities tend to act more as competitors than as partners in cooperation (Brunet-Jailly 2006, 3). Business-affine non-state agents, irrespective of their ad hoc-ist, informal and under-institutionalised activities (Capellano, Richardson, and Trautman 2021, 182; Dupeyron 2008, 92; Ganster and Collins 2017, 498; Grimes 2002, 33), are thus the *de facto* drivers of CBC. Hence, unlike (Western) Europe, where CBC can adopt both of Hooghe and Marks's types of governance, North American CBC, if at all, approximates their 'type two' process. It is more a form of micro-regionalisation than of micro-regionalism, focusing on practical, localised interactions rather than formal cross-border regional integration.

Non-Western regions are even less compatible with multi-level governance and scalarity approaches. In Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America, CBC is overwhelmingly a top-down process initiated by central governments. They are the key agents conceptualising, planning and financing CBC. As many southern countries – much more than established Western democracies and mostly acting under great resource and capacity constraints – struggle with a broad range of non-conventional cross-border security problems such as irregular (labour) migration, human trafficking, piracy, smuggling, gun-running, illegal logging, narcotics trade and international terrorism, central governments tend to securitise border regimes. On the African continent, the fact that the erstwhile colonial powers arbitrarily delineated borders, which as a corollary often cut through ethnic, language and religious communities (Kramsch and Brambilla 2007, 103), intensifies these problems. This unfortunate heritage impedes nation building, increases existing social and political tensions in multi-ethnic settings (Bach 2008) and thus adds to central

governments' perceptions of borderlands as particularly vulnerable and sensitive parts of the national territory. While central governments, often in cooperation with international organisations such as the World Bank, regional development banks, the United Nations Development Programme and the European Union promote CBC for developmental purposes, most CBC outside Europe remains Janus-faced: on the one hand, it intends to facilitate trade, investments and other economic transactions; on the other hand, it seeks to strengthen state security.

Furthermore, in non-Western regions central governments often dominate CBC due to the inherent weakness of local authorities. With the partial exception of large border cities (Chen 2005), they usually badly lack the human and material resources needed to be partners at eye-level with central governments in CBC projects. Not only in centralised political systems do central – local relations tend to be highly asymmetrical; this is also true for local authorities in countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines, where sweeping decentralisation reforms have taken place (Capuno 2005; Porio 2017; Rasyid 2004). However, the fact that more resourceful local governments such as those in the Indonesian Riau Island province are able to informally circumvent central government instructions and establish niches of locally driven, bottom-up CBC (Karim 2019; Karim et al. 2023), does not decisively change the general picture of heavily top-down CBC processes.

This situation is particularly evident for local governments across much of Africa and Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia, where they are entrenched in clientelist networks that benefit rent-seeking national patrons and their local clients (Aspinall and Hicken 2022; Hutchcroft 2014; Söderbaum and Taylor 2008b; Taylor 2002). While the Indonesia – Malaysia – Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), the trans-border growth corridors in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region (GMS) and, revived very recently, the East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA),⁴ have established Chief Ministers and Provincial Governors fora, until now these bodies have been relegated to consultative and implementing functions. The same holds true for non-state stakeholders such as business councils. The vibrant and vocal civil society networks, which have emerged against the odds in many of Asia's predominantly authoritarian political systems since the 1980s, still have to contend with the strong antipathy of state agents. They are thus largely excluded from CBC, except those organisations that do not fundamentally criticise CBC as an embodiment of the state's globalisation-friendly, seemingly neo-liberal economic policies. African civil society networks are much weaker and only in the more open Latin American polities have they become agents with a modicum of influence on CBC projects.

In conclusion, thus, the preceding discussion elucidates the significant limitations of the multi-level governance and scalarity approaches when applied to non-Western regions. These frameworks, which presuppose

considerable degrees of state rescaling, fail to effectively capture the varied and complex realities of cross-border cooperation (CBC) beyond the European context. As in virtually all regions outside Europe, regional cooperation is organised intergovernmentally and a supranational layer of governance is entirely missing. Dominant central governments, often authoritarian, tend to perceive cross-border cooperation (CBC) as a tool to enhance national sovereignty, competitiveness and regime security.⁵ At the grassroots level of governance, local authorities are typically under-resourced and lack sufficient autonomy. The presence of corporatist interest representation and a restrained civil society further substantially circumscribe the scope of vertical governance. The Eurocentric nature of multi-level governance and scalarity approaches not only undermines their validity in non-European contexts but also highlights the urgent need for the development of more inclusive, pluralistic, flexible, and region-specific frameworks that can effectively address the unique challenges and dynamics of CBC globally. This reassessment is crucial to avoid the pitfalls of theoretical imperialism and to foster a more nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between local and global forces shaping cross-border regions worldwide. The subsequent section will explore this issue in further detail.

Pathways Towards Global and Decentered CBC Research

While CBC emerged in many parts of the world, the political, economic, social and cultural contexts in which it is embedded differ markedly. How, then, can we advance towards more context-sensitive CBC research that does not merely regard the Global South as a testing ground for the theories developed by Western scholars (Gelardi 2020, 831)?

Considering the complexities of CBC's regional variations, in which cognitive and material analytical dimensions are closely but differently entangled, CBC theories with a global reach must comply with two major preconditions: they must capture cognitive as well as material factors driving CBC. In other words, we need theories that combine and/or reconcile these two groups of variables. We thus propose two overarching strategies for a global research agenda on CBC: (1) the search for theories that satisfy this requirement and (2) the intensification of comparative work based on the Comparative Area Studies approach. Under the roof of these two strategies, three pathways exist, which Maiken Gelardi (2020, 839) identified in a recent article on Global International Relations research: (1) Applying existing concepts in a different manner; (2) revising existing theories to better explain local dynamics; and (3) developing (new) theories from a local base. We add a fourth avenue: utilising theories developed in the West (and in most cases by Western scholars) but which are sufficiently

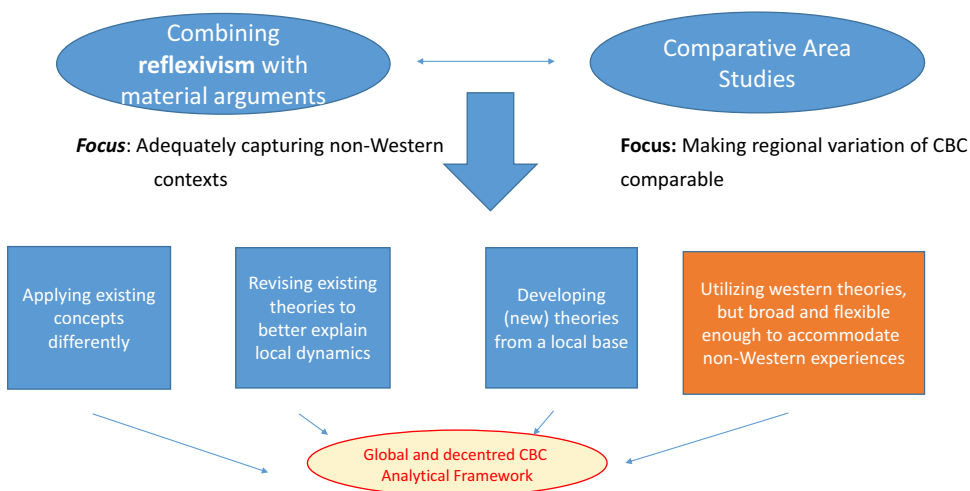


Figure 1. Avenues towards a global and decentred CBC research.

flexible to include non-Western CBC by decentring and pluralising it (see Figure 1).

Meeting Complexity: Combining Reflexive and Material Arguments

In the study of CBC, reflexivism has increasingly gained ground in recent years.⁶ Building on the pioneering work of the Finnish geographer Anssi Paasi, it has freed CBC research from thinking in ‘natural regions’, conceptualising cross-border regions as politically, socially and discursively constructed territorial units. Viewed through a reflexive lens, border regions are contingent entities, produced and reproduced by social actors in a dynamic process of negotiation and contestation, reflecting societal power relations (Newman and Paasi 1998; Paasi 1986, 2009, 2020). This has shifted attention to factors such as (regional) history, culture, identities, symbols, norms, ideas, discourse, narratives and knowledge. Reflexive approaches thus sharpen scholarly attention to cultural difference, making them more context-sensitive than positivist approaches that narrowly consider rationality as a concept independent from time and space. Yet this emphasis on cognitive drivers of CBC should not obscure the fact that CBC is also often closely linked to material factors such as socioeconomic development and economic growth. Reflexive theories should thus also be able to integrate the material dimensions of CBC into their analytical framework.

Comparative Area Studies: Globalizing and Decentering CBC Research

As stated in the introduction, research on CBC is overwhelmingly case based. Comparative studies exist, but rarely adopt a cross-regional perspective. Tellingly, existing cross-regional studies compare CBC in Europe and North America (Blatter 2001, 2002, 2004; Herzog and Sohn 2014), the two world regions with the greatest similarities of CBC, but rarely compare European CBC with CBC in non-Western regions or, even less frequently, CBC in different regions of the Global South.⁷

A suitable approach to understand CBC as a research object of global reach and at the same time one that differs across world regions is Comparative Area Studies (Ahram, Köllner, and Sil 2018). Comparative Area Studies seeks to increase the context-sensitivity of conventional disciplinary research on non-Western phenomena by reconciling the discipline's theoretical and methodological state-of-the-art with the region-specific expertise of area studies. It provides researchers with methodological tools that help to overcome widespread concerns that, due to its diversity, studying CBC cross-regionally means comparing apples with oranges.⁸

One such tool Comparative Area Studies provides to make CBC globally comparable is the relaxation of Sartori's (1970, 1036) ideal of 'unit homogeneity' (Soss 2018, 22) through 'family resemblances' and 'radial categories' (Fisher-Onar 2020, 15; Huotari and Rüländ 2014, 437). Family resemblances denote categories in which cases share some or most features, but not all (Collier and Mahon 1993, 847). For instance, Southeast Asian growth polygons fit Perkmann's (2003) definition of CBC, but differ from European CBC in terms of nesting, local autonomy and stakeholder participation. Radial categories subdivide similar cases into sub-categories by adding adjectives to the central category (ibid., 849). For instance, due to regional similarities, CBC could be subdivided into Western European, Eastern European, North American, African or Southeast Asian CBC, or, based on predominant functions, into spontaneous CBC, resource management CBC and economic development CBC (Wadley and Parasati 2000, 323).⁹ This signals that the respective CBC schemes belong to the overarching category of 'CBC', but that their cross-regional (or intra-regional) differences relegate them to a subcategory.

These tools are not without risks as it is, for example, unclear how much heterogeneity family resemblance and radial categories would allow while still placing cases under the overarching category. Yet they combat essentialist tendencies (Park and Brock 2023, 1275) such as elevating European CBC to the gold standard. Family resemblances and radial categories thus permit global comparison even if CBC differs markedly across regions. At the same time, it helps to uncover the causal or constitutive mechanisms that characterise regional variations.

Four Avenues Towards Global, but Decentered CBC Research

Subsumed under these overarching strategies towards global and decentred CBC research are the three avenues which Gelardi (2020) delineated and a fourth one we add here. Gelardi's first avenue towards a Global IR is *applying existing concepts differently*. This approach can also be utilised in CBC research. It recognises that CBC exists globally but that in other world regions it is not the same as in Europe where it originated. This implies that the concept of CBC travels and diffuses to other regions. At the end of its journey it has undergone some change, making it 'almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha 1994; Bilgin 2008).

Highlighting local agency, the latest generation of diffusion research informed by sociological institutionalism has significantly contributed to Global International Relations research. This means that the recipients of alien ideas, concepts, institutions and policies are not merely viewed as passive takers but as agents who proactively reinterpret, reconstruct and repurpose them (Acharya 2004, 2009). However, although studies repeatedly mention that the European Union, the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) have 'exported' CBC to Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia (Association of European Border Regions 2010; Bach 2008; Dent and Richter 2011; European Commission 2014; Kramsch and Brambilla 2007; Musialkowska 2015), we could not identify theory-guided research investigating how and under which conditions local agency has changed CBC in non-Western regions.

The second avenue Gelardi proposes is *revising existing theories* 'to better explain local dynamics'. Examples in International Relations research are approaches such as 'subaltern realism' (Ayooob 2002) and 'peripheral realism' (Schenoni and Escudé 2016), which adjust Western realist theory to the specific conditions of the Global South. In CBC research, we consider the New Regionalism Approach (Hettne 1999, 2014; Hettne and Söderbaum 2000) as an example of a revised theory. The New Regionalism Approach substantially revised conventional theorising on regionalism and adapted it to the conditions of the Global South, in particular Africa (Söderbaum and Taylor 2008a,b). Yet theory revisions to integrate non-Western knowledge, culture and historical experience often must contend with the critique that they are only filling gaps in existing theories, transforming them into middle-range theories which can be applied only to a specific world region.

The third avenue Gelardi suggests is the most demanding one: development of completely new theories and concepts informed by the specific conditions in the Global South, preferably devised by Southern scholars. Yet such home-grown theory building in the Global South which can be generalised and applied to other world regions, while desirable, is very rare in social science.

The Latin American *dependencia* theory is a noteworthy exception. For CBC, we are not aware of an attempt to develop a wholesale home-grown theory.

We thus add a fourth, less ambitious, but still innovative, avenue: relying on existing theories developed in the West, often also by Western scholars, but that are broad and flexible enough to subsume contexts that differ from European CBC. Such an approach that suits the complex and variegated nature of CBC and favourably responds to our requirement of combining reflexive and material factors is eclectic theorising. This brings us to Peter Katzenstein's (2007) '*analytic eclecticism*' as a fertile approach for globalising while decentring CBC research.

Analytic eclecticism is a pragmatist response to theoretical dogmatism. Reducing complexity for the sake of theoretical parsimony, disciplinary schools tend to overlook, neglect or question causal mechanisms that do not fit existing paradigms. Rather than concentrating on only one school of thought, analytic eclecticism combines components of different research traditions to produce new analytical frameworks (Katzenstein 2007, 397). Sacrificing parsimony (Sil and Katzenstein 2010, 412), it enables researchers to cope with the complexity of social phenomena. However, rather than being a 'theoretical synthesis of existing research traditions' (Katzenstein 2007, 398), analytic eclecticism selectively adopts and reinterprets 'concepts, causal mechanisms, explanations and prescriptions' from contending research traditions (ibid., 398). These analytical components of competing theoretical schools are creatively reassembled and interconnected, giving rise to 'novel frameworks' and enabling scholars 'to capture a more nuanced understanding of a complex world' (ibid., 398).

As a research framework, analytic eclecticism is particularly useful in (Comparative) Area Studies when concepts derived from Western experiences encounter historically and culturally different life worlds or are re-purposed, as often happens in regions of the Global South. In other words, analytic eclecticism is an approach suitable for transcending cultural boundaries and the search for area-based knowledge. Rejecting universal explanations that ignore regional variations (Sil 2020, 440), analytic eclecticism opens a global perspective on CBC, while decentring explanations of its formats, functions and governance processes. As CBC by no means entails only material dimensions such as the economic performance of border regions or their governance efficacy, but also includes cognitive factors such as (cross-border) identities, a combination of rationalist and reflexivist arguments would leave ample room to regionally specify the weight and the sequence of causal mechanisms. Although Blatter does not explicitly refer to Comparative Area Studies, his comparative work on CBC in Europe and North America could be regarded as an example (Blatter 2001, 2002). He fruitfully bridges diverse epistemological traditions, arguing that instrumentally driven CBC in North America is more informed by an 'objective – materialist world-view' that can be better captured

by positivist approaches, while reflexivist scholarship is more apt to explain European 'identity-providing' CBC (Blatter 2001, 183).

An even more persuasive example of analytic eclecticism is Chen's (2005) comparative study of East and Southeast Asian CBC schemes. By implicitly integrating different epistemological lenses, Chen goes beyond Blatter. His synthesis forging an analytical framework out of four key variables, that is, global-local nexus, decentring of the state, cross-border social capital, and proximity and transportation, combines material as well as cognitive strands of theorising. Although Chen does not explicitly ground these variables in specific theoretical approaches, one may argue that the global – local nexus stands for a political economy lens, decentring of the state for scalarity, cross-border social capital for a reflexive and cognitive perspective, and proximity and transportation for a spatial dimension.

Chen's insights into regional variations of CBC could be further nuanced if combined with the method of fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). This is a macro-qualitative configurational comparative method developed by Charles Ragin (1987) which, so far as we can see, has not yet been utilised in CBC studies. Based on Boolean algebra, QCA is usually applied for formalised, standardised and systematic analysis of a medium number of cases where statistical methods struggle with problems of statistical significance and missing degrees of freedom (Schneider and Wagemann 2012), a condition typical for CBC research. Unlike statistical analysis, QCA does not search for correlations, but instead for set-relational patterns including the search for necessary and sufficient conditions. QCA emphasises the complexity of causality by discovering multiple conjunctural causation, asymmetric causal relationships and causal heterogeneity. Cross-regional comparison of CBC schemes thus does not identify only a single variable that affects CBC in the regions studied, but combinations of conditions shaping CBC. Taking again Chen's study of eleven CBC schemes in different world regions as an example, applying QCA could have provided differently weighted combinations of his four key variables explaining the respective forms of CBC. As researchers would carefully calibrate their chosen indicators for the four variables, it allows precise measurement of the strength of causality, making CBC research more nuanced than if conducted with conventional statistical or qualitative methods. Analytic eclecticism is thus an approach able to deconstruct the complexities of CBC which are reflected by CBC's highly variegated empirical manifestations due to different conceptions of regionalism, borders and political cultures.

A second option meeting our criteria of theoretical breadth and flexibility to capture phenomena of non-Western CBC is *practice theory*.¹⁰ It is an even more elegant approach than analytic eclecticism because it entails a better trade-off between parsimony and context sensitivity. Geographers have occasionally worked with the practice concept without, however,

theorising it.¹¹ Like analytic eclecticism, practice theory – a cultural theory (Reckwitz 2002) – is able to capture the complex interplay of material, cultural and ideational mechanisms affecting CBC. Conceiving ‘the social as bundles of ideas and matter that are linguistically, materially, and intersubjectively mediated in the form of practices’ (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 14), practice theory reconciles rationalist and reflexivist strands of theorising. Staying with Blatter's (2001, 2002) above-mentioned studies, practice theory would permit him to examine CBC in Europe and North America under one theoretical roof.

Bridging materialist and reflexivist dimensions of reality endows practice theory with a markedly extended explanatory scope compared to competing theories. By reintroducing the material world to the analysis, it remedies the textual bias which characterised the linguistic turn in International Relations studies (Neumann 2002, 627). More than these theories, practice theory is able to identify rhetoric – action gaps, a problem many CBC researchers encounter in Europe but, due to ubiquitous informal processes, to a much greater extent in Southeast Asia and Africa. In these regions, justifications for CBC and actual everyday cooperation practices often markedly diverge. Working with practice theory, Nadalutti (2024), in a recent study on the Malaysian-Chinese ‘Forest City’ project in the Iskandar Malaysia development corridor, a Malaysian urban modernisation scheme bordering Singapore (not a CBC scheme in the strict sense, but partly overlapping with the Indonesia – Malaysia – Thailand Growth Triangle), was able to persuasively reveal the ‘greenwashing’ strategies of the investors. While investors amply use green rhetoric, on closer scrutiny it turns out that the project is neither environmentally nor socially sustainable. In Africa, CBC in the form of development corridors is frequently depicted as a developmental strategy. Yet, in reality, it tends to benefit central – local clientelist networks and to enable illicit cross-border activities (Söderbaum and Taylor 2008a; Zajontz 2024).

Practices are ‘performative acts’. They are ‘ways of doing things’ (Pouliot and Cornut 2015). Practices are patterned, that is, they exhibit regularities over time and space, they are performed in a socially organised context, and they entail social recognition (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 6). Highlighting the patterned, regularised and iterative nature of practices, practice theory – like historical institutionalism – introduces a *longue durée* perspective (Pouliot 2020). Enduring iteration creates ‘rules of the game’, ‘conventions’, and ‘norms’ (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 12). Inculcated into the collective memory, they become routinised and habitualized everyday behaviour (ibid., 6). Without conceptualising this path dependency deterministically and ruling out (incremental) change, the historical depth of practice theory enables researchers to understand how the material, ideational, and institutional aspects of CBC schemes have developed over time and the ways in which they gain legitimacy. This approach is crucial for explaining the regional

differences observed in CBC. Practice theory thus allows us to trace why and how, in world regions where the typical European interplay of supranationality and subsidiarity does not exist, different trajectories of history, culture, statehood and the everyday practices derived from them legitimise CBC as a top-down agenda with the objective of strengthening the nation state. This would also prevent the pitfalls involved in the uncritical emulation of European CBC as Basboga (2020) proposed in the article quoted in the introduction.

Nadalutti's (2024) research on the Malaysian Forest City highlights the significance of time-honoured collective memory. Using practice theory, her study unveils the project's significant lack of social and environmental sustainability. She attributes this finding to the path dependency of China's developmental state variant (Johnson 1982; Zhang 2018), which characterises the country's developmental take-off. Chinese investors have, over time, deeply internalised these practices and habitually exported them to their projects abroad. Often overlooked, development strategies are autobiographic (Williams 2002). That the developmental state model to varying degrees has also been adopted in other Asian countries including Malaysia further exacerbates its impact in development projects with Chinese partners (Kurlantzick 2016). The unabated influence of the developmental state model explains why in the Forest City project nominal economic growth, a state-centred, top-down decision-making process, a muzzling of civil society opposition and a strong belief in technological solutions – all key characteristics of the developmental state model – supersede concerns about environmental and social sustainability.

As 'performative acts', practices are also collective accomplishments (Bueger and Gadinger 2015, 449). They are enacted by 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1998), social entities that are defined by like-mindedness based on 'mutual engagement' (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 18) and 'collectively shared knowledge, systems of symbols, meanings or cultural codes that generate rules for action' (Bueger and Gadinger 2015, 451). To perform practices competently, learning, training, professional experience, and exposure to largely identical life worlds are important prerequisites (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 6). Communities of practice thus share normative and epistemic grounds for action, such as the developmental state ideology in Nadalutti's (2024) Forest City study, which render their practices competent and socially meaningful.

With respect to CBC, these communities of practice differ substantially across world regions and constitute another factor in regional variation. Yet they are present in all regional contexts, making cross-regional comparison possible. In (Western) Europe they primarily include regional planners, local officials, media personalities, businesspeople and agents of civil society (Paasi 2020, 21); in North America primarily private sector representatives. Nadalutti

(2024), in her Forest City study, identifies investors, state leaders and bureaucrats, advisors, developmental professionals and the Sultan of Johor as the main representatives of a developmental community of practice.

These communities of practice, with their diverse cultural, political and professional backgrounds, pursue markedly differing objectives, interests and agendas. All of them face opposition of various strength: in Europe alternative communities of practice composed of populist and nationalist forces actively promote re-bordering, as examples from Switzerland (Sohn and Scott 2020), Denmark, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary (Nadalutti and Rüländ 2024) suggest. In Africa, ethnic and kinship groups work towards the (re-)establishment of pre-colonial transboundary spaces, while in Southeast Asia civil society networks and social movements struggle for a CBC that also takes into account the living conditions of the less advantaged segments of the population. The existence of communities of practice and the contextualisation of CBC practices are thus significant factors in establishing cross-regional, global CBC research able to persuasively explain regional variation.

Given the still underexplored field of CBC in nonwestern regions, qualitative inductive or abductive methods may be the preferable choice to operationalise a research agenda based on practice theory. Bueger and Gadinger (2018) recommend an ethnographic approach, including extended field work, participant observation, expert interviews, process tracing, documentary and discourse analysis.

Conclusion

This article has critically examined the predominant Eurocentric focus and theoretical shortcomings in the existing literature on cross-border cooperation (CBC). We have highlighted that much CBC research is deeply embedded in the European integration experience and often fails to account for the diverse contexts and complexities of other regions such as Eastern Europe, North America, and particularly the Global South.

We have argued that the reliance on case studies and the widespread adoption of Hooghe and Marks (2003) multi-level governance model and related scalarity approaches, though insightful within its (Western) European context, do not sufficiently capture the varying dynamics of CBC occurring outside Western Europe.

In response to these limitations, we have explored alternative theoretical avenues that aim to globalise and decentre CBC research, thus making it more inclusive and applicable across different geopolitical and geo-economic landscapes. Our discussion has underscored the need for CBC research to move beyond its current theoretical constraints and incorporate broader, more diverse perspectives. We posit that reflexive approaches, which simultaneously

build bridges to the material dimensions of CBC, combined with Comparative Area Studies and its focus on cross-regional comparison, are pivotal in facilitating the globalising and decentring of CBC research.

Subsequently, departing from Gelardi (2020), we delineated four pathways to achieve this theoretical expansion: 1) reapplying existing concepts in a different manner; 2) revising existing theories to better explain local dynamics; (3) developing (new) theories from a (non-Western) local base; and 4) identifying (existing) Western-developed theories able to include and represent non-Western experiences of CBC.

Specifically, by further elaborating on the fourth pathway, we proposed the adoption of analytical eclecticism and practice theory as frameworks capable of providing a more comprehensive understanding of CBC. These frameworks are distinguished by their ability to effectively bridge disciplinary theoretical and methodological state-of-the-art with region-specific insights, increasing their context sensitivity and adeptness at addressing regional variations.

We further showed that analytical eclecticism can be empirically validated through its application in the comparison of CBC initiatives across different regions, enabling a synthesis of diverse theoretical perspectives to comprehensively address the multi-dimensional aspects of CBC. For example, Chen's (2005) cross-regional analysis of CBC schemes integrates different epistemological lenses, analysing how local – global dynamics, state decentralisation, cross-border social capital, and geographic proximity influence CBC. His work demonstrates how region-specific economic policies and cultural practices influence CBC structures and outcomes, providing a nuanced understanding of CBC that accounts for variable geopolitical, economic, and social conditions.

Similarly, empirical evidence from the analysis of the Malaysian – Chinese 'Forest City' project (Nadalutti 2024) illustrates how practice theory can elucidate the performative acts of governance that diverge significantly from stated sustainability goals, revealing a complex interplay of material and ideational factors. This example underscores the capability of practice theory to provide deep insights into the culturally diverse and localised practices that shape CBC outcomes.

We demonstrated how different methodologies can further nuance cross-regional comparison. Applied to analytic eclecticism, Qualitative Comparative Analysis can provide differently weighted combinations of variables explaining the respective forms of CBC. In contrast, practice theory would require the use of inductive and abductive methods, which greatly rely on ethnographic methods. These include comprehensive fieldwork, participant observation, interviews with experts, process tracing, as well as documentary and discourse analysis.

As we move forward, it is essential that the proposed theoretical and methodological advancements undergo rigorous empirical testing.

Future research should focus on testing the adaptability and applicability of these frameworks in diverse regional contexts, thereby substantiating their potential to reshape and enrich the CBC research landscape. We believe this approach is a critical step towards achieving the objective outlined by Gelardi (2020), namely, to advance CBC research through the development of theories that originate in the Global South, are crafted by southern scholars, and are applicable across regions. We acknowledge that this is an arduous process, requiring significant shifts in the production of knowledge, a topic, though, that extends beyond the scope of this article.

Notes

1. For exceptions, see Söderbaum (2004) and De Lombaerde (2010).
2. The Council of Europe and the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) count slightly more than 100 CBC schemes. Other counts are even higher.
3. For a similar critique, see Dilla et al. (2022, 436).
4. Here called BIMP-EAGA Chief Ministers, Governors and Local Governments Forum, available at: https://bimp-eaga.asia/sites/default/files/2024-11/BIMP-EAGA_CMGLF-Reps.JPG (accessed 14 December 2024).
5. For Southeast Asian examples, see Grundy-Warr, Peachey, and Perry (1999, 307) and Phelps (2004, 343), for Africa, Bach (2008, 176).
6. Examples are Herzog and Sohn (2019); Sohn and Scott (2020); Villanueva, Kidokoro, and Seta (2023).
7. For exceptions, see Chen (2005); Nadalutti (2014, 2022); Nadalutti and Rüländ (2024).
8. See, for instance, Perkmann's (2003) comment cited in the introduction.
9. Using the term 'micro-regions' instead of CBC, Unruh (2016) distinguishes for Africa 'economic', 'natural-resource-based', 'migration and displacement-based', 'conflict-related', and 'ethnically-based' micro-regions.
10. Parts of the following three paragraphs draw from (Rüländ 2023, 2024).
11. For examples, see Paasi (1986); Van Houtum and van Naerssen (2002) and Kramsch and Brambilla (2007).

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