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“‘Europe/Asia’ Regionalism, Higher Education and the Production of World Order”

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Forthcoming - Policy Futures in Education
Abstract
From the early 1990s onwards, various European Union reports have commented on the low level of European exports and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the Asian region, and the invisibility of Europe in the Asian imagination in comparison to the US. To overcome this problem, a series of policy and programme initiatives have been launched that includes higher education as a platform, is funded by the EU’s development agency, EuropeAid, and which uses the interregional institutional structures of ASEAN and ASEM. Initially, the focus for higher education was on generating European visibility and Asian capacity through the creation of networks and curricula initiatives. However, since 2000 the higher education initiatives in the successive Asia-Europe inter-regional policies have been reoriented toward realising the Lisbon Agenda; of developing a globally competitive European knowledge-based economy (Lisbon 2000; Kok Review 2004). Asia-Europe inter-regionalism is now being used to facilitate an explicit competitiveness agenda for Europe through (i) prioritising the development of a European market in higher education that is attractive to Asian students; (ii) synchronising Asian higher education structures with those that have developed in Europe as a result of the Bologna Process; (iii) recruiting ‘talent’ from within the Asian region; and (iv) the development of research collaborations, such as funded research institutes. Funded by the EU’s development agency, EuropeAid, the target for these initiatives is not the very low-income countries in ASEAN and ASEM, but education trade with, and brain drain from, China and India. This generates tensions in the foreign policy mix of education, trade and development, making the EU vulnerable to charges of imperialism and neo-colonialism, whilst the politics of the inter-regional structures also shape the terrain of higher education.
Introduction

From the early 1990s onwards, various European Union reports have commented on the low level of European exports and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the Asian region, and the invisibility of Europe in the Asian imagination in comparison to the US. To overcome this problem, a series of policy and programme initiatives have been launched that include higher education as a platform. These initiatives are funded by the EU’s development agency, EuropeAid, while the institutional structures are interregional - the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM).

To date, however, there has been very little research on these higher education strategies and mechanisms as they are mediated through processes of globalization and inter-regionalism. Nor have education researchers concerned themselves with inter-regionalism as sites, structures and actors, though there is some work on regions as subjects of globalisation (cf. Dale and Robertson, 2002; Koh, 2007) and a burgeoning literature on regions, such as the study of the EU and education. A possible reason for this lack of attention is the tendency on the one hand toward methodological nationalism in education research, and the conceptual pairing of scales – global/local - as sites of investigation (see Arno and Torres, 2003), on the other. I will be arguing, however, that examination of these strategies, scales and relations is particularly fruitful in revealing the complex ways in which higher education is being mobilized across space to advance and realize social transformations in the world order.

My analysis draws upon the new political economy of regionalism (cf. Hettne and Soderbaum, 2000; Dieter and Higgott, 2003) and international political economy (Cox, 1981, 1996; Bieler and Morton, 2001) to argue that current inter-regionalizing projects emerged out of the transnational restructuring of production and social forces beginning in the 1970s. From the early 1990s, higher education has been increasingly drawn into advancing these transformations both within nation-states, and at the level of the regional and global. These processes are not static. Indeed I will be arguing that the political nature of the interregional structures, together with the changing agendas within these regions (with higher education viewed as a key motor for the realization of a knowledge-based economy), act as important forces of change.

The paper begins with some theoretical notes on international political economy and the political economy of regions. I then go on to outline the development of Asia-Europe inter-regionalism since the 1960s. The second half of the paper focuses on the shifting agenda in Asia-Europe inter-regionalism and specifically the role of higher education in re/constituting this relation. Throughout the paper my focus is primarily on the Europe Union as an actor in this process – though it will be important to extend this work to bring in a more nuanced account of the various Asian actors.

International Political Economy and Regionalism

The theoretical underpinning of my argument is informed by a neo-Gramscian analysis of world order based on the work of Robert Cox (1996) and developed by writers that include Burnham (1991), Gill (1992), van Apeldoorn (2001), Bieler and Morton (2001),
Morton (2003) among others. This body of work constitutes a distinct critical theory route to considering hegemony, world order and historical change. The core idea is that patterns of production relations are the starting point for analyzing world orders. However, production is not viewed in a narrow economic sense. Rather Cox insists that we view production more broadly; as “…the production and reproduction of knowledge and of the social relations, morals and institutions that are the prerequisites for the production of physical goods” (Cox, 1989). Discerning modes of social relations of production enable us to see how changing production relations—for example the changing production relations within ‘Europe”—give rise to particular social forces that become the basis of power within and across states and a specific regional and world order (Cox, 1987).

Cox insists on the reciprocal relationship between power and production and he develops a framework to examine this relationship (Cox, 1996: 97-101). This framework enables us to see “…how power in social relations of production may give rise to certain social forces, how these social forces may become the bases of power in forms of the state, and how this might shape world order” (Morton, 2003: 155). This framework can be viewed as a social ontology; that is, it is a way of representing/constituting the social world and thus is also a claim about the nature of the relationship between actors and structures. Furthermore, the social relations of production, forms of the state and world orders are dialectically related to each other, so that deep changes in production, such as we saw with the crisis of western capitalism in the early 1970s, generate transformations in forms of the state and in world order. Hegemony prevails when there is a coherent fit between a configuration of material power, a set of ideas about world order, and the institutions that administer that order. Change, the result of deep ruptures in production, state power and world order, is the result of a breaking down of hegemony.

The rise of new regional structures, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1992 (Barrow et al., 2003) and the transformation of existing regions in the world order (such as the earlier European Coal and Steel Community (1952) to the European Union (1992)), can be viewed within this framework of historical structures – the particular configuration which now constitutes the current world order emerging from the collapse of the post-war hegemonic projects, including the Keynesian Welfare National State (cf. Jessop, 1999). The ongoing project of transformation of ‘Europe’ as a region within the world order is the result both of changes in its institutional form (for example, through processes of enlargement) and also its socio-economic content (Apeldoorn, 2001: 73). As I will argue below, successive changes in the socio-economic content of European order - for example, the 1992 Maastricht Treaty which launched monetary union; the 2000 Lisbon Agenda to transform Europe into a globally-competitive knowledge-based economy; and the re-launched Lisbon agenda (Kok, 2004) - were all attempts to resolve the crisis in European capitalism. These initiatives also reflected the triumph of neo-liberalism as an organizing political project (Robertson, 2008).

Ravenhill (2005) defines regionalism as the formal inter-governmental collaboration between two or more states. However, this is an overly statist view and there is considerable mileage in viewing regions in Hurrell’s (1995) terms; as the outcome of integration processes involving the coalition of social forces: (i) markets, private trade and investment flows; (ii) policies and decisions of companies or organisations; and (iii) state-led initiatives.
Inter-regionalism, the primary concern of this paper, refers to the interactions and relationships between regional blocs, such as between the European Union and the North American Free Trade Agreement; Asia-Europe relations for instance through the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), and so on. Again the socio-economic content as well as the institutional form of these inter-regional relations is what is important, and indeed these changes are the object and outcome of struggles between social forces in the world order. For instance, the changing nature of the Asia-Europe relation over time has been shaped, in part, by the role of the US in building new regional coalitions (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation - APEC), by the rise of China as a potential market and power, by pressure within ‘Europe’ to expand its production base, and so on.

‘Europe/Asia’ Inter-Regionalisms

To understand the changing Asia-Europe relationship, we need to lay out key aspects of the history and politics of those organisations who have mediated it; the European Union, the European Commission, Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and ASEM. Absent in this listing, though no less important, is APEC – an alliance of Pacific Rim countries dominated by the United States but excluding Europe. APEC, as a regional organization, was first conceived by the Japanese and Australians in 1989; a defense against a ‘Fortress Europe’ when the US and some Asian countries were concerned over the consequences of the EU’s strategy of creating a single market (Kairns and Mingst, 2004: 189).

There is a long history of links between the two regions - Asia and Europe - though these links have been largely bilateral arising from Europe’s colonial past (Gilson 2005: 311) - Indonesia (Netherlands, Portugal), Singapore (UK), Malaysia (UK) and Vietnam (France). The first phase of Europe-Asia relations (1967-80) was engaged with setting up the machinery for regular institutional contact, while a second phase (1980-1994) focused on broadening economic and political contact. At this point, EU-ASEAN relations were formalized when the EC-ASEAN Cooperation Agreement was signed in March 1980. A third and current phase (1994 onwards) has seen the creation of a new organisation, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM - in 1996), to overcome fundamental problems within the existing EC-ASEAN structure (Forster 2000: 790).

Forster’s (2000: 791) detailed analysis of the EU-ASEM relationship is helpful in understanding the complex and (often) tension-ridden nature of this relationship. He argues that by the early 1990s it was clear that the Cooperation Agreement (CA) that underpinned ASEAN had a number of weaknesses in regulating contact between South East Asia and Europe. These included that (i) there was no EC budget to support EC-ASEAN activities; (ii) the focus tended to be on trade rather than investment; (iii) policy instruments tended to be based on development aid and were relatively crude; and, (iv) changed conditions in the wider economy had rendered the CA less relevant.

ASEAN also provided the EU with a rather limited window on Asia and there was an increasing feeling expressed within the EC that both the United States and Japan “…were stealing the march on the Europeans through the growing importance of the Asia Pacific Economic Council (APEC) which the EU had been unable to gain observer status in since
1993” (Forster, 2000: 791). A weak Asia-Europe link left the space open for a strong US-Asia relation. The EC was also particularly concerned to engage with the growth of the various Asian powers and to embrace a wider conception of Asia than that offered by ASEAN, as well as extending trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) within Asia more generally. However, even to its admirers, ASEAN was viewed as increasingly stagnant, (Capie, 2002: 151). There were other complications in the EC-ASEAN relationship. For instance, there were differing views among EU Member States as to the kind of relationship they wanted with Asia, such as privileging ASEAN as a key partner in European-Asian inter-regionalism thereby limited Europe’s opportunities for engagement with China and India (at this point not part of ASEAN).

Of significance, too, for the EC-ASEAN relationship was a change in the nature of the EU following its change of status and identity from the European Community to the European Union in 1992 (Maastricht Treaty). With its new status, the EU sought opportunities to act in ‘state-like’ ways with other states and regions in order to further its own political ambitions. This also provided the EU with occasions and mechanisms to set agendas, in turn enabling the EU to legitimate itself as an actor in the system of nation-states.

Within the new EU context, the idea of ‘European values’ also became more significant. Some Member States actively these promoted these values, using key committees within the new EU structures (in particular the European Parliament (EP) and the Council of Ministers (CM)) to garner support for the insertion of European values into the various agreements and funding mechanisms. These ideals included the conditions for fair trade (labour standards, workers rights), the protection of human rights, democratic values and environmental protection. Despite considerable reluctance on the part of the EC, it was nonetheless forced by the European Parliament to impose conditionalities on EU-ASEAN relations (Bobrow, 1998: 10). ‘European values’ were also strongly promoted in the various Communications from the Commission as part of its Asia strategy, with funding for education programmes conditional on the promotion of these values. This resulted in fundamental disagreements within and between the Asia-Europe regions over the EU’s imposition of sanctions (for instance on China), with the ASEAN members viewing the EC as engaging in forms of neo-colonialism.

Adding to this mix of discontent was dissatisfaction within the EC as to ASEAN’s general approach to regionalism. The EC is highly bureaucratic whilst many ASEAN countries emphasized a more consensual approach to cooperation (Beeson and Jayasuriya, 1998: Kahler, 2000). Forster concludes his own analysis of EU-ASEM arguing that by the early 1990s “...an economic relationship was embedded in a dysfunctional boundary agreement that no longer served the purpose of effectively and efficiently regulating contact between the two groups” (Forster, 2000: 194; Dale and Robertson, 2002).

In 1994, the EC published its communication, Toward a New Asia Strategy. However, it took a wider geographical view of Asia, overlooking the narrower geographical framing that ASEAN represented to head off the USA’s interest in the Asian region. However the member countries of ASEAN were annoyed with the EC for their marginalisation. In a Communication in 1996 - Creating a New Dynamic in EU-ASEAN Relations, the EC sought to overcome the tensions that it had generated. However relations became progressively
worse when ASEAN permitted the accession of Myanmar (Union of Burma) to its ranks. The EU immediately imposed industrial and agricultural sanctions on ASEAN, creating a major rift in EU/ASEAN relations.

A solution to the impasse that emerged between the EU and ASEAN was eventually negotiated by Singapore’s Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong. Tong proposed the establishment of a new organisation - the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM). ASEM was a more informal, though also more institutionalized, meeting of the 15 EU Member States and the European Commission. ASEAN was now extended to include China, Japan and the Republic of Korea (ASEAN +3). Within months, the EC approved the initiative, in effect replacing the need to renegotiate the EU-ASEAN Cooperative Agreement (Stubbs, 2002).

ASEM’s multi-layered structure was to facilitate multilateral government-to-government, group-to-group, and bilateral contact, while ASEM pump-primed cross-cutting networks of non-governmental interests (business, academics and citizens) that thickened the connections within and across the two regions. ASEM was then a useful mechanism for mediating Asian-European relations. It also contributed the tri-polarization of the global economy by strengthening the ‘East Asia-Europe’ side (Gilson, 2005: 308; 313).

Promoting Visibility through Asia-Europe Higher Education Collaboration

Higher education’s insertion into Asia-Europe inter-regional relations can be traced back to 1994 when the EC set out an overall framework for European Commission relations with Asian countries in its Communication, Toward a New Asia Strategy. The Strategy paper, covering South, South East and North-East Asia, emphasized the rapid changes that had taken place in the region throughout since the 1970s and the need to ensure an effective and pro-active presence in the region.

The Strategy Paper put forward 8 key priorities including the development of more open free markets, sustainable development and poverty alleviation, and strengthened bilateral relations. It also emphasized the need to raise the profile of the EU in Asia and ensure a more coordinated approach to relations within the region. Subsequent targeted Communications were developed for specific countries, including China (COM (95) 279, 05-07-95), India (COM (96, 275, 25-06-96) and Hong Kong (COM (97) 171, 23-04-97). However, higher education institutions were to focus on cultural exchange and networking, funded by development aid from the EU’s EuropeAid Cooperation Office budget.

This was followed with a Communication from the European Commission in 2001 (COM, 469) Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnership (EC, 2001) to “provide a new strategic framework which would address the changes since 1994 and to establish a coherent, comprehensive and balanced strategic approach for our relations with Asia in the coming decade” (p. 5). In this second Communication, the EC argued that though political dialogue had intensified during since 1994 and there had been an increase in trade, foreign direct investment from Europe into Asia continued to be low and there was limited awareness within Asia of Europe as an entity and region.
The 2001 Communication, however, was mindful of transformations taking place in the global economy; it noted the acceleration of globalisation and intensification in the opportunities and challenges globalisation offered, particularly in terms of freer trade through economic liberalization. In the opening Summary, the EC concluded:

…much remains to be done, for example, in deepening and broadening our political dialogue, in enhancing our bilateral trade and investment relations and strengthening our cooperation in the WTO and in ensuring our aid programmes in Asia can achieve their full potential (p. 3).

A number of points can be noted in this 2001 Communication. The geographical conception of Asia was now being strategically expanded, so that while the 1994 Strategy paper covered South, South East and North East Asia, the 2001 paper now included “…Afghanistan in the west to Japan in the east and from China in the north to New Zealand in the south, plus all points between” (p. 6). The Communication also indicated that the EU had increased its trade deficit with Asia – which it attributed to the EU’s policy of generously helping the Asian region overcome the 1997 Asian Crisis. However, the Communication continued to note that a fundamental priority was the need to promote a more open attitude toward market liberalization within Asia (p. 8). Specifically, the EC’s 2001 Communication was concerned the hesitation amongst the South Asian economies (i.e. India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh) with the World Trade Organisation process of progressive liberalization of the goods and services sectors (p. 13; p. 20), arguing that a more open approach to trade and investment had been fundamental to Europe’s growth and that it should also be embraced by its Asian partners.

It is in the imperative interest of both regions to see this system strengthened further, and in particular to see the early launch of a new Round of multilateral trade negotiations. These negotiations, on the basis of a comprehensive agenda including such key issues as investment and competition, will be crucial in helping revitalise growth in Asia in the aftermath of the financial crisis, and in particular to encouraging increased FDI flows to the region (EC, 2001: 10).

The 2001 Communication also noted that the bulk of outward FDI from the EU continued to go to North America rather than Asia, limiting the financial return to EU capital as well as leaving the region wide open to US interests and investments. Education, it would seem, had also failed to increase levels of awareness in Asia of Europe as an economic and cultural partner; it noted

…there had been little development in the degree of mutual awareness between the two regions, with stereotypes on both sides still casting Europe as introspective and old fashioned, and Asia as a distant and exotic continent, presenting more challenges than opportunities. Much needs to be done to raise the profile of Europe in Asia (EC, 2001: 14).

ASEAN, it would seem, was viewed as losing momentum following the Asian crisis and thus an increasingly ineffective forum for negotiating Asia-Europe relations.
Strengthening educational, scientific and cultural exchange within Asia was advanced as a key means of overcoming this problem of “mutual awareness” (ibid: 10). This was translated into support for enhanced cooperation between higher education institutions, the stepping up of academic, research and student exchanges, and promotion of structural networks to enable “mutually beneficial cooperation” (ibid: 19). However, while promoting the idea of co-operation, the Commission was clearly concerned with the nature of the number of Asian students who studied in the US and Australia, as opposed to Europe, as we can see from the following.

Europe has a great deal to offer in the field of higher education and scientific research, yet the majority of ‘Asian’ students studying abroad tend to go to North America or Australasia as a first priority. Equally, the number of European academics or students with links to Asia remains very small, while European studies remains an underdeveloped field on most Asian countries (ibid: 20).

The EC’s concern was with how to break into this lucrative higher education market (cf. Verbik and Lasanowski, 2007).

**A New Urgency in Europe: Consequences for ‘Asia-Europe’ Inter-Regionalism**

In 2003, the EC released a further Communication – *A New Partnership with East Asia* (COM 399/4). There was now a new sense of urgency for dialogue and cooperation including higher education. In order to advance these policy areas, the 2003 Communication proposed launching a new ‘visibility’ strategy, “…using the resources of the Headquarters, Delegations and Member States to spread a number of key messages” (p. 4).

According to the 2003 Communication, recent reports on long term developments in international trade all predicted that “…the centre of gravity of the world economy will have shifted to the Asia Pacific region, with ASEAN emerging as one of the world’s largest exporters” (EC 2003a: 6). A key concern for the European Commission was to ensure that its own economic and political interests in the region, and thus the global economy, could be advanced. The Communication concludes:

Most of Europe’s main economic partners and competitors are currently forging economic partnerships and alliances with the region and/or its individual members that could challenge EU interests in the region. Therefore the EU will have to play its part in this intensive interweaving of economic ties with South East Asia. Its strategy should be both offensive, seeking to improve the EU’s position in this important market, and ‘defensive’ protecting its existing economic interests in the region (EC, 2003a: 8).

The 2003 Communication noted worsening figures in the EU’s FDI into Asia - a decline from 3.3% (1998) and 2.6% (1999) to 1.6% in 2000, with only slight improvement in 2001 (1.8%). This represented a weakening of the already poor share for the EU of FDI into Asia and limited its capacity to take advantage of what the Commission perceived as new
opportunities on offer as the result of the opening up of China (p. 9).

The EC’s strategy for securing visibility through higher education resulted in key mechanisms being identified to take this forward - the Asia-Link scheme, and the EU-ASEAN University Network Programme (AUNP) – both of which were established in 2002 to promote cooperation between the two regions. Specifically the 2003 Communication argues:

Co-operation in higher education is key to:
- improving mutual understanding and increasing awareness of Europe in South East Asia and vice-versa
- re-positioning Europe as a major higher education partner and centre of excellence in South East Asia
- promoting scientific and technological development thus enhancing growth and competitiveness
- strengthening the economic and cultural presence of Europe in South East Asia (and vice versa)

Lines of action
- Develop regional and bilateral strategic dialogues with stakeholders at the various levels of government authorities, national associations of higher education institutions and national rectors’ conferences
- Continue implementing the Asia-Link and ASEAN-EU Universities Network Programmes (AUNP) that are successfully promoting higher education cooperation
- Support scholarship activities through initiatives such as Erasmus Mundus
- Promote cooperation in the field of culture with a view to enhancing mutual understanding between the civil societies in South East Asia and Europe, in particular through supporting the work of the Asia-Europe Foundation (p. 44).

The Asia-Link programme, administered by EuropeAid, was to provide funding for projects that brought higher education institutions in Asia and Europe into partnership with each other to develop resources, draw up new curricula, and improve administration. However, because of the funding stream, priority was placed on the low-income Asian economies (such as Malaysia, Pakistan, Vietnam, Bhutan, and China - Asia-Link, 2004). The minimum partnership comprised two or more European partners and two or more Asian partners, while grants were awarded on a co-financing basis (the Commission funding only 75% of eligible costs). By 2004 the Asia-Link Programme funded 126 projects involving a total of 550 institutions; by 2005 155 partnerships had been funded involving 707 institutions at a cost of 53 million euro. However, the main applicants continued to be European (Italy, UK, Germany) rather than Asian-based universities (basic statistics from the Asia Link Programme, 2005) suggesting the continuation of a European-centered knowledge and capacity paradigm.

The second main initiative, the Asia-Europe Universities Network Programme (AUNP), was allocated a budget of 7.8 million euro and a Secretariat which operated under the umbrella of ASEAN. Funds were to be made available for 4 kinds of activities: (i) ASEAN-EU Rector's Conferences; (ii) Round-Table meetings; (iii) Technical Assistance Missions; and, (iv) Follow-up Activities. The content of these four initiatives is revealing –
suggesting that the AUNP Network Programme has been used to promote knowledge about and potential borrowing/emulation of initiatives being developed in Europe as part of the reorganization of the European Higher Education Area - quality assurance in higher education, credit transfer systems within Asia and Europe, higher education and sustainable development, autonomy, regional cooperation in a globalising world, and borderless higher education.

The 2005-6 Strategy Paper continued to build on the 2001 and 2003 Communications, this time laying out a two-tiered approach – an Asia-wide Programme and an ASEAN Programme (to include ASEAN+3 [of China, Japan and South Korea] along with India). Asia-Link was to promote partnerships between higher education institutions in Europe and Asia aimed at having an Asia-wide reach (25-35 million euro for 2005-6), while the AUNP was directed at ASEAN member states only (10-15 million euro for all ASEAN activity, including education).

In 2006 the European Commission announced that it would end funding for the Asia-Link partnership programme, and that new initiatives would be launched in 2007 (EuropeAid, 2007). At the same time, Asia-Link would continue to coordinate the European Higher Education Fairs, first launched in 2004 in Bangkok. Over 2006-8, seven fairs will be funded; in China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, The Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. Each of the seven events have two main elements: (i) a European Higher Education Fair, offering HE institutions from all European Member States a platform for promotion in Asia; and (ii) an Asia-Link Symposium, to promote discussion on higher education cooperation between the EU and the respective country, and to demonstrate some of the EU’s activities in this sector that benefit Asia. The series is being implemented by a consortium of four academic exchange agencies, led by Campus France (formerly ÉduFrance), and involving DAAD (Germany), Nuffic (The Netherlands) and the British Council (UK) (EuropeAid Cooperation Office, 2007).

Finally, the European Commission’s Regional Programming for Asia Strategy Document, 2007-13, signals a further shift in the European Commission’s strategy for higher education in relation to Asian inter-regionalism. Funding would now be directed to the support of regionally-oriented/anchored research institutes;

…focusing on topics related to sustainable development and EU-Asia relations. Activities will focus on strengthening research related capacities, promoting public debate on EU-Asia relations and twinning of Asian and European research institutes, think tanks and similar circles, aiming at enhancing mutual understanding (EC, 2007: 13).

Only India and China would now receive funding for EU research institutes that had a more national perspective. These programmes reflect a move away from more general academic, curricula based collaboration to those that are centered in research and innovation.
‘Europe/Asia’ Regionalism, Higher Education and the Production of World Order

From this analysis of Asia-Europe inter-regionalism, it is evident that higher education is playing an increasingly important role in constituting that relation. However, it is clear that the socio-economic content, as well as the nature and scope of the institutions involved, have changed significantly over the course of the past 15 years. These shifts, I would argue, reflect transformations in the historical structure of world order – the result of changes in the social relations of production within the global economy. One consequence of these transformations has been to tie higher education more tightly to the economy. This tie, however, is increasingly being shaped by a rebalancing in the social forces within Europe particularly since 2003, reflecting the triumph of neo-liberalism as a political project within Europe and transnational capital (van Apeldoorn, 2001; Robertson, 2008).

The new Lines of Action registered in the Communications on Asia, particularly from 2003 onwards, reflect these changes. The Lisbon Agenda launched in 2000, that “Europe must become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (European Council, Lisbon, March 2000), was represented by neo-liberal social forces as failing. This followed slower than anticipated growth, especially in comparison to the USA (Collignon, 2006). A recalibration of the European project was set in motion, with higher education drawn more firmly into the orbit of Commission policy. Universities were now viewed as the ‘motors of the new knowledge-based paradigm’ to deliver the modern European economy (EC, 2005b: 152; Robertson, 2008).

This has meant movement forward on a 4 pronged basis on higher education in Europe: to (i) create a unified and European Higher Education Area with a uniform higher education architecture enabling internal mobility and external intelligibility; (ii) create a European Research Area committed to innovation and job creation; (iii) generate and promote a competitive higher education market which recruited international students (in competition with the market leaders - USA and Australia) (EC, 2005a); and (iv) promote the EU’s interests in the regions of the global economy through the development of the ‘external dimension’ (Zgaga, 2007).

The creation of a higher education market and research area has required major institutional change to the structure of Member States’ universities. From 1999 onward, work began on the Bologna Process (Bologna Declaration, 1999) to harmonize Member State’s academic degree structures to enable learner and worker mobility, facilitate credit transfers and ensure quality assurance (Corbett, 2005; Keeling, 2006). And while the Bologna Process is a remarkable in what it has achieved (46 countries – well exceeding the boundaries of Europe, 16 million students), it has also been accompanied by major struggles over whose knowledges are to be retained and whose are to be obliterated across the participating institutions.

However, Bologna’s value to the EU is that it creates, for the first time, an intelligible ‘Europe’ and one that enables Europe (and particularly the Commission) to promote the idea of a European Higher Education system to a global market. The European Higher Education Fairs, for instance, now the centre-piece in the 2006-8 Asia-Link Programme, are dependent on being able to represent Europe as a coherent entity to the Asian market,
rather than being composed of national higher education programmes. Europe’s higher education market is growing rapidly, with France and Germany increasing their numbers of Chinese students studying there by more than 500% each since early 2000 (compared with the US whose figures grew by only 50%) (Verbik and Lasanowski, 2007).

The Bologna Process (along with other higher education initiatives like the European Qualifications Framework) has also been the subject of conferences between Asia-Europe university rectors, funded under the Asia-Europe Universities Network Programme. However, Asia’s interest in the Bologna Process, as a system for reorganizing the Asian region along European lines, threatens Australia’s higher education market in the Asian region, unless Australia brings its own qualification framework into line with it (Robertson and Keeling, 2007). These kinds of initiatives within Europe, which are in turn mediated through inter-regional institutions like ASEM and programmes like Asia-Link, can be seen as challenging and destabilizing existing interests and hegemonies in the global and regional economy.

Finally, to widen the pool of talent for the development of Europe’s knowledge-based economy, instruments such as Erasmus Mundus (2004) were devised to attract the best brains from throughout the world (not only within the European region) to study in research-based Master’s programmes. Again, Asia-Europe inter-regional structures have been used to promote this programme. And while Erasmus Mundus is represented as advancing the interests of Asia in the EC’s 2003 Communication on Asia, it is difficult to see this as anything other than brain drain, and this must threaten Asia’s own supply of skilled labour. The contradictions between aid for development in Asia, and aid to recruit labour to be developed and retained in Europe, are all too obvious.

There are, of course, other problems with Europe’s use of higher education as an instrument for inter-regionalism arising from the tensions within ASEM itself as an institution. One problem is that the EC and EU members are often pursuing mutually incompatible objectives in the ASEM relationship, and these different agendas (trade versus aid; markets versus human rights) undermine the ongoing collaborations and deliberations of Europe-Asia regionalism. Similarly, ASEM’s structure, intended to widen its embrace to include civil society, has also opened it up to scrutiny by NGOs and other civil society actors who have, in turn, critiqued ASEM’s neo-liberalism agenda and pressured for a more democratic, managed development agenda. Despite this, the European Commission has continued to ratchet up the trade in education services agenda as part of the WTO negotiations, pursued knowledge economy strategies through the recruitment of brain-power, and at the same time promoted the idea of Europe as a more civil model for democracy and a protector of human rights. The tensions in this agenda have fueled the terrain of struggles. These are likely to increase rather than dissipate as the widening chasm reveals Europe’s representations of itself in Asia and its real material interests and projects.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the mobilization of higher education in mediating and constituting Europe-Asia social relations and showed how increasingly higher education is being
constituted through institutions and social relations that operate well beyond national boundaries – in this case through inter-regional relations. To date, however, very little work has been done to bring these spaces of knowledge production into view for scrutiny. However I would argue that it is vitally important that we widen our lenses to include these kinds of relations, to reveal the myriad of new and complex ways in which higher education is being constituted. I have also argued that this is a dynamic process tied to changes in historical structures (Cox, 1981). In the case of the Europe-Asia relation, the socio-economic content of this relation is also changing over time, reflecting important transformations taking place both within and across these regional spaces. While initially higher education was to promote visibility in Asia through curriculum collaborations and building networks (though always for economic purposes), the geographical and strategic scope of Europe’s interests in Asia have increasingly been shaped by the rise of China as an important power and as a potential market for higher education as well as to block the US’s interests in the region. And while Gilson (2005: 318) argues the EU still retains less interest in East Asia than the region’s economic and political weight would merit, it is evident that this is changing.

Europe’s interests in Asia have also been shaped as a result of its own internal political agendas, policies and projects. Since 2000, and 2004 particularly, the scope and content of Europe’s policies, including higher education – have been directed at realizing Europe’s economic objectives of becoming a globally-competitive knowledge-based economy. These policies are now shaped by the triumph of neo-liberal social forces within Europe. As a result, policy has been directed at developing a higher education market within Europe, while the EU has begun to pursue trade and liberalization agendas within the Asian region more generally. At the same time, there is considerable contestation over the ECs use of regional forums, like ASEM, to promote these agendas, and there are evident tensions between the EU’s use of development funds to further its own internal economic objectives. And while there have been calls from within Asia to strengthen Asia-Europe relations as a counter-balance to the unilateralism of the US since September 11 (see Koh, 2001) and as a means for promoting cultural diversity, the various higher education instruments might (quite rightly) be regarded as a continuation of past forms of colonialism and a new form of economic imperialism.

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