When W. W. Rostow was asked in 1990 by the journal *Encounter* to suggest a ‘metaphor for our time’ he offered ‘the coming age of regionalism’ (Rostow 1990). He argued that it was the single image of the future that had the virtue of relating significantly to ‘the other major dynamic forces’ shaping global society. The outcome of such forces would, in the worst case, be ‘fragmentation, violence and stagnation’. To manage these forces in an age when the capacity of the state is declining, he contended, we require a primary role for regionalism in a ‘federal pattern of regional and global cooperation’ (1990, p. 7). While claiming that his vision should not be seen as utopian, he was clearly suggesting the ‘coming age of regionalism’ as a desired and necessary path. This places him in a familiar tradition of regionalist doctrines and schemes put forward since the Second World War by those who have sought a greater role for regional organization in global governance to promote various normative projects such as free trade, trade protection, collective self-reliance, security, order, or welfare (Fawcett, 1995; Taylor, 1990).

In the following decade a less grand, but ultimately more significant, claim was made on behalf of a region-centric characterization of world politics. Academics, policy makers and commentators began to speak not only of a ‘new regionalism’ to capture a new institutional and policy emphasis on regionalism in the 1990s but of a new status for regions within the emergent world order (see, for example, Palmer, 1991, particularly chapter 1; Fawcett and Hurrell (eds), 1995; Hettne and Inotai, 1994; Gamble and Payne (eds), 1996; Lake and Morgan (eds), 1997; Grugel and Hout (eds), 1999; and Robson, 1993). Peter Katzenstein (in Kohli *et al.*, 1995, pp. 14–15), for example, offers the image of ‘a world of regions’ to capture what he sees as the move towards a new arena for world politics, while prominent security theorists such as Barry Buzan (1991, 1999), Mutthiah Alagappa (1995), and
Mohammed Ayoob (1999), suggest that global security must now be seen largely as the sum of its regional parts rather than as a product of global logic. Some leading economists ascribe a new prominence to regionalism (Arndt, 1993), or refer to the emergence of a ‘second regionalism’ (Bhagwati, 1994), or the advent of a ‘new regionalism’ (Ethier, 1998), whether or not they support such a development. For other scholars, the region offers a possible new site of promotion of world order values of democracy, and human rights and a possible site of resistance to globalization (Falk, 1995b). While these scholars may not go as far as Rostow in seeing regionalism as providing the single metaphor for ‘the coming age’, in other respects their image of a ‘world of regions’ represents a more dramatic claim, for it asserts that regions are in fact becoming an important locus of world politics rather than simply suggesting that they should do so.

The central claim underlying this cluster of images, prominent in the policy and academic domains, is that regions – geographically contiguous states and peoples – are, or are becoming, key actors, identities or arenas in world politics. Although the proponents of region-centric thinking do not necessarily dismiss the agency or identity of other entities – such as ethnic groups, states, civilizations, international agencies, or transnational corporations – or dismiss the importance of other political arenas, they necessarily see regions as significant in their own right, and not merely derivative of state or global power. While they recognize that there has been a 50-year history of regional schemes and doctrines of various kinds, they see these previous efforts either as having been ineffective, or as having been idealistic non-starters, or as derivative of hegemonic power. This, they argue, is the first time that developments in regionalism are occurring in a form that really matters in world politics. This therefore amounts to a claim to fundamental transformation of the global order.

This chapter is principally concerned with the question ‘what kind of transformation?’ It is one thing to accept the claim that regions are now an important locus of power in world politics, but this tells us little about the significance of such a transformation in terms of structures, processes, values and interests. In exploring what the assumed transformation means we consider four specific questions. The first concerns the changing political role of regions. What kind of political entity or site is ‘the region’ becoming? Is it to be seen increasingly as a locus of authority, identity, community or agency in world politics? The second question takes this a little further by exploring the relative power of regions as against other centres of power, notably global institutions and states. Third, we explore the contending normative projects underlying the ‘new regionalism’ and the normative implications of the various regionalist doctrines that cluster around these projects. The fourth question links these values to contending political interests and asks how we might characterize the interplay among them. It asks ‘which interests prevail?’