

Cultural Political Economy of Small Cities, Anne Lorentzen and Bas Van Heur, Eds., Routledge, 2013, 216 pages, ISBN: 978-0-415-81863-6, £28.00 (paperback)

The publication of Richard Florida's *Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) sparked a regional development revolution that has lasted over a decade. Florida argued that regions should invest in *culture*, and those investments would attract creative individuals that will push innovation and reintegrate core regions into reshuffled global economy that moved base industries to the developing world. Florida speaks the language of empirical economic geography – regressions and location quotients – while connecting with broader society that evaluates economic well-being on qualitative assessments like confidence, happiness, and sense of belonging. As “creative class theory” morphed into actionable policy, critiques rightfully followed (Peck 2005). Now, even Florida (2013) himself acknowledges that his theory is not a panacea for deindustrialization. Are we facing a turn towards a post-creative economic development paradigm? With *Cultural Political Economy of Small Cities*, Anne Lorentzen and Bas Van Heur bring together a series of papers that salvage this floundering theory by collectively arguing its most appropriate strategic deployment might be in the most forgotten regions of the post-industrial economy – small cities.

The editors open with an introduction that establishes the critical viewpoint of *cultural political economy* and begin the volume with a section on “Theory and Methods.” The theoretical introduction receives a more robust explanation in Van Heur’s Chapter 2 regarding the “socio-spatial specificity of economic development.” Van Heur argues that cultural economists like Florida or Allen Scott undertheorize the role that politics plays in economic development. The simple dialectic of development institutions and actors, constantly reifying economic imaginaries (like creative class strategy) is ripe for deconstruction to find the political conditions that allow these (often failing) imaginaries to proliferate. This deconstruction is likely to reveal contingencies that lead to more informed policymaking. One such contingency, small cities, is furthered explored, through conditions of place, territory, scale and networks.

The theory and methods section (Chapters 2-4) closes with a case study on Darwin, Australia (Chapter 4). Chris Brennan-Horley presents a novel use of mental mapping and GIS translation to locate the spaces of inspiration and creativity. This chapter is arguably the most useful in the first grouping. First, it articulates just what “culture” and “creativity” mean. In Darwin, the arts are particularly important to the economy. But the arts are not merely stuff to consume. They are part of a *productive* process whose essence exists in space. Secondly, Brennan-Horley argues a place-based strategic development plan would address the elements of Darwin that best contribute to the arts.

His research informants show through mapping exercises that urban elements besides infrastructure are critical to their craft. This suggests a complexity to the cultural landscape that has been entirely missed by creative class development theory and strategy.

The editors then group together a series of essays which examine culture as an economic growth strategy (Chapters 5-7). Lorentzen (Chapter 5) explores the use of experience-based development strategies with a look at small cities in Denmark. Unlike tourism promotion, these types of activities are entirely produced as a show. They are seemingly straightforward development strategies, but Lorentzen suggests that their success may have a deleterious effect on local culture. Place identity becomes synonymous with an event, mentally and materially, erasing culture. Another highlight in this section is the contribution from Chalmers and Danson regarding Gaelic culture in Glasgow (Chapter 7). City officials, local Gaels, and even the BBC have nurtured Gaelic culture, and that has led to Glasgow becoming a cultural hub replete with festivals and shows. Their case is a positive sign that cultural economic development does not always carry negative externalities like homogenization.

Part three, concerning actors, networks, and alliances, is the most cohesive section of the book (Chapters 8-10). Soren Smidt-Jensen (Chapter 8) heeds the call to deconstruct economic imaginaries and takes readers to Vejle, Denmark, for another look at the experience economy. Unlike Lorentzen's piece, this case shows the complexity of how such economic imaginaries come together. As Van Heur suggests earlier in this volume, there are copious amounts of positive discourse that do their work over a period of years. The actors and institutions involved in this particular case study succeeded, but Smidt-Jensen suggests that that the complex structure can come tumbling down from a less-favorable city council or economic shock. Bain and McLean (Chapter 9) ditch the spectacle paradigm and focus on the eclectic culture of cities. Looking into Thunder Bay and Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, they make a point to criticize the mimicry present in economic development strategies. Culture, they argue, is a grassroots phenomenon and cannot be created top-down. Thus, policymakers need to reconnect with the everyday life of its cultural base. Finally, Paul Knox and Heike Mayer (Chapter 10) move to a transnational scale and examine the Cittaslow movement. This institution certifies cities that embrace a slow-growth, rustic culture. While the authors are still concerned about long-term prospects of cultural preservation in the face of transnational attention (tourism), it is a great example of how networks might be able to become political players in the preservation of non-consumptive folk culture.

The book closes with three selections examining "culture, governance, and social equity" (Chapters 11-13). Nancy Duxbury (Chapter 11) conducts an extensive review of cultural development plans in small Canadian cities and searches for some consistent

patterns in how culture is conceived and planned for in these cities. Her inability to draw defensible conclusions on the success of these plans, though, is not a shortcoming. As she notes, the lack of patterns reinforces the idea that culture is locally contingent and plans will fail/succeed in large part to this local context. Gribat's discourse analysis of cultural planning in the former East Germany (Chapter 12) is strong theoretical work, while Jennifer Mapes' closing Chapter 13 on cultural strategies in the American West is an empirically strong, qualitative examination of how the creative class theory has been internalized in small towns.

The book as a whole has two stark shortcomings. The overall impact of this collection would benefit from grouping case studies that simply illustrate cultural political economic development separately from those which apply *critique* of political economy to cultural development. A regrouping might have led the editors to push contributors to emphasize their points more assertively. Furthermore, this book really needs a conclusion. Van Heur opens with wonderful insights on the history of this field of study, but many of the contributors are actually addressing *future* directions of cultural economic development. What can readers take away from reading this book, is not clear. The best edited collections feature papers that essentially speak to one another. Since this is not naturally happening in the subsections, Van Heur's thoughts might have been more useful as a reflective conclusion or broken into shorter prefaces to the subsections.

Secondly, despite the contributors' best efforts, their collective justification that "small cities" is an important contingency in cultural economic development is not convincing. The illustrative cases unfold in small cities, and it is refreshing to see scholarly attention focused on the periphery of the Global North. But the more critical contributions would apply to big cities as well as small cities. The decision to couch this collection as simply different from big city investigations is ineffective. Unlike many critiques, the contributors are not out to discredit or dismiss Floridian theory. They are offering focused, in-depth qualitative analyses that would be logistically difficult to conduct in large metropolitan areas. Quite simply, Floridian theorists working on evaluations of large metro areas could learn from these cases that step away from the computer models and into the proverbial sausage factory of public policy.

Overall, the book's shortcomings should not reflect on the contributions themselves. Recently, Florida (2013) begrudgingly acknowledged that creative class economic development *is not benefitting social equity* on a broad scale. Why? The answer, as Van Heur suggests, lies in deconstructing local development paradigms to identify winners, losers, and the political forces pushing inequitable strategies. These contributions do just that. There are some success stories, some questionable failures, and a lot of guidance on how critical economic geographers can proceed with a political-economic analysis of cultural development. On that, researchers, students, and regional

development professionals grappling with creative class theory will find the theoretical discussions and methodologies of these cases invaluable.

References

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