

## BOOK REVIEW

**Thilo Lang and Franziska Görmar (eds.), *Regional and Local Development in Times of Polarization. Re-thinking Spatial Policies in Europe*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 382 p., ISBN 978-981-13-1189-5**

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Debates around how to deal with increasing inequalities gained significant importance following the 2007 global financial crisis. This is the case not only for personal inequalities, but also for regional inequalities. Indeed, recent electoral outcomes, such as Brexit referendum and the emergence of right-wing nationalism throughout Europe, have shown that regional inequalities might be more important than scholars and policy-makers thought (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018). As such, there should be no surprise that the issues of lagging regions and how to deal with them have risen to prominence in regional studies. Lagging regions are sometimes labelled “places that do not matter” and their electoral behaviour in favour of populists is interpreted as a sort of revenge for being left behind over long periods of time (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018), or as a “rebellion of the globalisation’s losers” (Davoudi, 2019). Moreover, Davoudi (2019) argues that we are not only dealing with places “left behind”, but also “kept behind”, by “neglect, lack of investment and misguided policies stemming from the long-term neo-liberal obsession with aggregate growth, big city boosterism and trickle down effects”. The author, therefore, calls for re-imagining European cohesion policy, and she is not the only scholar stating this. Iammarino *et al.* (2017) also call for re-imagining cohesion policies, arguing for a place-sensitive approach, a new concept that asks for policies that take into consideration the context, and not only the local one, but also the context exterior to local conditions. In both cases, as in many others, one can notice a shift from place-neutral or even-place-based approaches to place-sensitive and more systemic approaches to dealing with lagging regions.

Against this background, the edited volume of Lang and Görmar argues that one should regard regional inequalities in a broader perspective, taking into consideration not only differences between central and peripheral places, the performance of lagging regions *per se*, or the “catch-up” perspective, but to look instead at the core-periphery relations and its subsequent processes: polarisation, centralisation and peripheralisation. The book starts with the assumption that polarisation is an ongoing process that is happening in a threefold manner within the EU: demographically, economically, and even electoral. The authors are searching

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for answers to a set of highly relevant and specific questions that deal with the nature of EU's cohesion policy, the manner in which spatial inequalities are (re)produced. They also discuss the appropriate policy solutions focusing on alternatives to the neo-liberal mainstream and the extent to which current spatial policies could be reviewed in order to promote more equitable ways of development.

The book incorporates results from various multi-partner and interdisciplinary research projects funded as part of the 7th Framework Programme (most of the chapters consist of conceptual thoughts and empirical results from RegPol2 Project) and H2020 programme (IMAJINE Project), as well as contributions from invited researchers. The book is composed of four parts and 15 chapters, written by 32 authors affiliated to 14 institutions from 11 countries. Despite this diversity, it is well structured, highly coherent, easy to read, and accessible to a broad scientific community as well as to policy makers.

The first part of the book discusses the relationship between current power structures in Europe and the socio-spatial polarization process. The main idea that seems to lie at the heart of all three chapters composing this part is that inequalities are not "natural", but (re)produced by power relations and institutional practices. The authors share a common conceptual and theoretical ground and their work has been significantly influenced by Eduard Soja and David Harvey philosophy. The first chapter (second of this volume) takes the form of a discussion between Ray Hudson and John Pikles on various issues related to uneven development. They see uneven economic development as "inherent to capitalist economies" and emphasize the negative effects of policies favouring the main centres of growth, mainly by discussing the cases of former mining and industrial areas of North-East and North-West England that have been neglected following the emergence of neo-liberalism policies in the '80s. The authors conclude on the existence of "variegated" forms of capitalism, some being preferable to others. The third chapter, written by Costis Hadjimichalis, gives a clear Marxian perspective on the "burning question of uneven geographical development under capitalism". It criticizes the UK's Thatcherism and German ordoliberalism, the "current elitist ruling order" in Europe, as well as the emergence of FIRE economy (finance, insurance and real estate). It would have benefited this chapter to take into consideration other views and theories as well as engaging with some empirical facts. In the following chapter, Merje Kuus gives some insights regarding the transnationalisation of the policy expertise within the EU, as well as the uneven character of this process which affects the capacity of peripheral states/regions to promote their interests in the "silken culture" of Brussels.

The second part of the volume builds on the underlying assumption of the first part, i.e. policies and subsequent power relations are probably the main determinant of polarization. The five chapters that compose this part discuss some aspects related to the impact of European policies on socio-spatial disparities across Europe or in various parts of it. According to Jones *et al.* (the fifth chapter) most of the EU states are witnessing increasing regional GDP disparities within their borders. Against this

background, the authors review academic and policy engagements with the idea of territorial cohesion and insist on its conceptual limitations: the elusive nature of the term, the overemphasis on the economic dimension and the fact that “in both EU policy documents and academic debates, it is not always clear whether the concept refers to a policy objective that is pursued through a particular policy means or whether territorial cohesion is the policy tool or technology itself that is used to achieve certain policy goals”. Jones et al. argue that spatial justice is a more powerful concept and a more appropriate response to regional inequalities than territorial cohesion. Although until now the idea of spatial justice has been primarily focused on urban scale, “it has the potential to make a useful contribution to understanding the unequal distribution of economic resources, public services and well-being at other geographical scales, not least the regional scale, particularly in relation to the spatial policies of the European Union”. But perhaps the most interesting idea promoted by Jones et al. concerns not only a switch in EU spatial policy from pursuing territorial cohesion to fighting for spatial justice, but also the revision of spatial justice by incorporating ideas from the capabilities theory of Amartya Sen: “a revised account of spatial justice, incorporating academic discussions on human capabilities and agency could be formulated into a guiding principle for a new spatialisation of the European Social Model”. The sixth chapter (Loewen and Schulz) focuses on the cases of Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary and Slovakia and highlights the theoretical incompatibility between cohesion policy and innovation policies. The authors notice that promoting growth and innovation has become an important objective of the cohesion policy despite the theoretical incompatibility and contradiction in pursuing both. They conclude by suggesting a disconnection of growth and innovation objectives from the Cohesion Policy. Benedek et al. (8<sup>th</sup> chapter) look at the impact of growth poles strategies in Romania and conclude on the fact that regional disparities have increased despite theoretical claims that such policies induce spillover effects and drive regional and local development.

The third part of the volume brings into discussion some case studies from Romania, Hungary and Estonia that are meant to emphasize the importance and the implications of public policies on spatial polarisation process. Moldovan documents the negative consequences of outmigration on local development in the case of the North-Western Region of Romania. Ceobotary and Mihály highlight the manner in which community-based initiatives in the sector of renewable energies “have had little to no impact on deeply rooted peripheralisation dynamics”. Their case study is an example of “mismatch between existing conceptualisation of community-owned projects in Western Europe and the practical situation in CEE countries” that hinders more effective use of structural funds. Martin Graffenberg brings into discussion empirical evidences from South Estonia showing that, despite some challenges, innovation could happen in peripheral areas as long as firms adopt the appropriate strategies. Case studies discussed within the third part of the book bring empirical evidences that support place sensitive and distributed policies advanced by

Iammarino et al (2017). Overall, the main ideas that emerge from the chapters included in this part support regional redistributive policies, and advocate for strengthening the ability of local administrations from peripheral areas to act autonomously.

The fourth part of the book is composed of two chapters that seek to conclude on the “relevance of scientific research for political practice and policy making”. The authors endorse alternative approaches that go beyond encouraging “purely economic growth”, based on the conviction that “life, creativity and satisfaction are as important as social innovations, new economic approaches and diversification of the economic bases of the region”.

As Benedek and Kurko (2010) express it, there are two main approaches to regional inequalities: a “structuralist” one, (accounting for a significant number of theories and interpretations, according to which disparities originate and evolve in a core-periphery type system) and a “regionalist” one (that states that regions have by themselves the necessary resources to project and follow their own chosen paths of development). From this perspective, the book edited by Lang and Görmar clearly tackle the issue of cohesion policy from a structuralist perspective.

Overall, the book is timely and highly relevant for the current debates around re-imagining the Cohesion Policy. However, it has some limitations despite strong merits: for example, not engaging enough with other views and theories on regional inequalities (e.g., the ones outlined in Wei, 2015). The volume is of interest and a useful resource for all those searching to understand regional inequalities as a “relational, multi-dimensional and multi-scalar concept”, as well as for those interested in conceptual and policy alternatives to current framework of Cohesion Policy.

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