

Them and us

Britain and the European city

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Here's a paradox for British policymakers: on many measures, the best European cities seem to perform better than their American counterparts. But, we have tended to look for the US for policy inspiration, and learn little from the Continent.

British attitudes to European cities are conflicted. Britons fly to Rome, Barcelona or Berlin for romantic mini-breaks. They like loft-living, café culture and iconic architecture, admire shiny urban tram systems and trains that run on time. They hanker after European standards of city living, public space and urban style, without, of course, the willingness to pay Continental levels of tax for them.

Yet, Labour's regeneration policies are heavily Americanised: clearly seen in the New Deals, innovation policy, clusters or UK Chancellor Gordon Brown's preoccupation with 'enterprise' in deprived areas (Troni and Kornblatt 2006). Have we been looking in the right place? While many American cities perform well economically, they are often divided, unequal and sprawling. Compared with their Continental rivals, many do not provide the economic, social and environmental 'package' that British policymakers want to deliver.

Things are changing. Ministers worry that British cities don't work as well as many of their Continental counterparts, and Government is starting to take European policy models seriously. For example, European influences are clear in the current drive toward

greater devolution and strategic autonomy (HM Treasury *et al* 2006; ODPM 2006; SURF and CUPS 2006).

Here, we attempt to provide a travel guide for aspirant policy tourists. We ask three big questions to help on the way. First, what is the 'European City'? Second, how are UK cities actually doing, compared with their European cousins? Third, what serious ideas can we import from the Continent, and what, if anything, can the Continentals learn from us?

Who's special now?

Over the past three decades, British policymakers have consistently looked west for inspiration. The last Conservative administration was heavily influenced by American New Right thinking, and Labour has been particularly keen on US urban policy. Look over the Government's cities agenda, and you will find an extraordinary level of American influence. Labour has looked repeatedly to the US, importing ideas and key figures to rapidly draw up and roll out a version for the British market. The Government's 'mixed communities' agenda draws heavily on the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program. Similarly, Labour's thinking on enterprise and clusters is based – almost exclusively – on analysis from Harvard University. Likewise, London Mayor Ken Livingstone drafted a number of Americans to run London's Tube and bus networks. The list goes on. Of course, there is some European policy networking and transfer. Labour's interest in social exclusion was

largely imported from France. But the concept has been tied to some very Anglo-Saxon policy objectives, such as ‘welfare-to-work’. While EU urban policy networks like EURO CITIES and COMPETE help spread ideas, they remain – relatively speaking – low profile and not hugely influential.

The British attitude to European cities has been at best inconsistent, at worst superficial. Urban strategy has tended to look admiringly at the ‘European City model’, as embodied by cities like Barcelona. The first Urban Task Force report and subsequent Urban White Paper were full of references to compact form, high-density living and café culture (DETR 2000; Urban Task Force 1999). City-centre living is a success story, but it illustrates the limits of our European understanding. We have not brought Barcelona to Britain. Provincial city centres in the UK are full of young, single people who don’t stay long. We have imported the built form of many European cities, but not the lifestyles that go with them (Nathan and Urwin 2006).

Similarly, the Government now routinely compares British cities with the best in Europe. But the tone alternates between cheerleading for urban renaissance, and fretting about UK cities’ long-term underperformance. Labour’s 2005 manifesto document stated:

There is no more powerful symbol, no more compelling evidence, of the progress our country has made over the last eight years than the success of our cities. (Labour Party 2005)

However, research for ODPM a year earlier highlighted disparities between big British cities and many of their European counterparts on population growth, educational achievement, connectivity, business attractiveness, and in quality of life. Most strikingly, the study suggested that British cities’

economic performance was particularly poor. On GDP per head, London ranked 23rd in Europe, at less than half the level of top performer Frankfurt (see Table 1). The other Core Cities lagged a long way behind the capital (Parkinson *et al* 2004).

Table 1. GDP per capita in selected European cities, 2001.

City	Euros per capita
Frankfurt Am Main	74,465
Karlsruhe	70,097
Paris	67,200
Munich	61,360
Stuttgart	53,570
Copenhagen	50,775
Amsterdam	38,203
Stockholm	35,733
Helsinki	35,322
London	35,072
Milan	32,122
Bristol	29,437
Lyon	28,960
Dortmund	26,548
Rotterdam	26,227
Leeds	25,619
Turin	25,042
Toulouse	24,852
Rome	24,766
Berlin	23,428
Birmingham	22,069
Manchester	22,099
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	20,499
Lille	20,191
Barcelona	18,449
Liverpool	16,466

Source: Barclays (2002), quoted in Parkinson *et al* (2004).

Note: data presented is a sample from the full survey of 61 European cities.

This data is much weaker than it looks, as the study's authors acknowledge, and as we discuss below. But, over the past year, it has helped trigger a shift in the Whitehall mindset. Policymakers now believe that successful European cities combine high growth, good social outcomes and sustainable development. American cities' performance is more uneven: higher rates of growth are undermined in many places by the negative economic consequences of segregation, social exclusion and sprawl. Rather than just admiring the paintwork of the best European cities, ministers are now starting to look under the bonnet.

Entente cordiale?

Some observers doubt whether international comparisons are really helpful. Cities are complex systems. Surely each is a product of its own history, trajectory and national circumstances? Certainly, the priority for policy must be to improve cities' economic, social and environmental performance, not to move up imaginary league tables.

But there are at least three good reasons to compare cities across countries. First, competition matters. Many businesses make international comparisons to inform investment decisions. This does not mean cities can 'compete' with each other in the way firms do. Fundamentally, cities are interdependent, tied into larger urban systems (Sassen 2006; Urwin 2006). Many firms are not mobile. But some can make location choices, and will weigh up the assets of different cities in the process. So it is important to compare urban offers, and to think about how some can be improved. Second, policymakers can learn lessons from elsewhere. As we will see, with the right approach and caveats, cities can transfer ideas and strategies, and make them work locally. Third, politics is inescapable. Like it or

not, politicians like to compare, and they like to boast.

While it is good to see the British policy establishment looking seriously at the European urban experience, there is a risk of falling back on 'lofts and latte', rather than proper policy fixes. Similarly, there is a danger of importing European solutions wholesale, without checking for suitability, context or fit.

How should we proceed? The first step is to get a better idea of what we're looking at. What – if anything – is the 'European City'?

The 'European city': myth and reality

Over 80 years ago, Max Weber set out a set of features common to all European cities, including specific institutional structures, tax systems, and notions of citizenship (Weber 1921). Today, however, it's not that simple. Modern urbanists argue that it's overly simplistic to lump European cities together into a single model (Bagnasco and Le Gales 2000). Cities are path-dependent: their economic, political and cultural positions are shaped by a wide range of historical, geographical and economic factors (Le Gales 2002). Just as American cities aren't all sprawling, 20th-century monocultures, European cities also defy neat definitions.

Comparative research and typologies

One vein of research looks at European cities in comparative perspective, slotting cities into a range of typologies and frameworks. Urban governance has featured prominently in many of these analyses (*inter alia* Kleinman 2002; John 2001; Hesse 1991; Batley and Stoker 1991; Newman and Thornley 1996). Although final typologies differ from study to study, one thing is clear: national boundary lines demarcate very different types of urban governance in Western Europe. Overall, there are four competing

models: *Anglo-Saxon* (United Kingdom and Ireland); *Napoleonic* (France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Belgium, Greece); *Germanic* (Germany, Netherlands, Austria); and *Nordic* (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland).

So, cities in the British Isles are administered differently to cities on the Continent, but Continental cities are themselves diverse. The substantial independence of Nordic cities, for example, contrasts sharply with high levels of national intervention in countries like France, where central direction has historically been more prominent.

These contrasts are not limited to governance alone: 'European' cities differ across a range of other indicators. Observers point to the contrast between low- and high-density urban areas, and the substantial variation that exists between Continental countries (Burdett *et al* 2004). Similar differences are visible in urban planning: witness the 'highly constrained growth patterns' of cities in northern Europe, versus the 'freer pattern of suburbanisation' seen in recent years in the South (Hall 2003; Newman and Thornley 1996). The physical 'footprint' of the Dutch city, for example, has more in common with British cities than Spanish or Italian ones.

Urban hierarchies

A second workstream examines the functional relationships *between* cities. This research has both European and global dimensions, classifying cities across wider urban systems.

A number of studies have examined a possible European urban hierarchy (Hall and Hay 1980; Brunet *et al* 1989; Kunzmann and Wegener 1991; Equipe PARIS 1993), while others have examined the role of European cities in the global economy (Sassen 1991 and 1994; Veltz 1996; Taylor 2001). European cities have a range of different specialisations –

manufacturing, tertiary services, government – and interact with each other in complex ways.

This research finds no simple, clear-cut distinctions between UK and Continental cities. In economic terms, Paris and Frankfurt seem to have more in common with London, New York and Tokyo than they do with Marseille or Bremen (Taylor and Hoyler 2000). The emergence of 'global cities', trading across specialised international networks, makes it harder than ever to refer to European cities as a single, monolithic group.

These studies stress the continued importance of national urban systems: they shape cities' physical forms, economic roles, and their political independence (Pumain 1999; Taylor 2003; Hall 2002). The fact that there are growing cross-boundary links between Continental cities does not mean that they are becoming more alike. Although places like Barcelona, Munich and Lyon have European roles, they remain very different because they are embedded in their respective national *urban* systems.

What drives national differences? First, and most importantly, national economic trends matter. Over the last 10 years, Britain and Spain have prospered, while Germany, France and Italy have seen slower growth, with important consequences for investment in each country's cities. National prosperity has fuelled substantial investment in cities in the UK and Spain, while new development has lagged behind in the Continent's slower-growth economies. Second, physical differences are important. Whereas Dutch, Italian and German cities are clustered close together – like British cities – the Spanish and French urban systems are more dispersed. Third, policy decisions play a crucial role. Welfare policies (see Lehto 2000), spatial strategies (Newman and Thornley 1996), and central government investment decisions shape the urban system.

Varying levels of devolution from the centre to regional and local government affect cities' economic, political and cultural roles (Green and Marshall 2005).

Vive la différence

Three decades of research puts paid to the popular myth of the 'European city', which has dominated British policymakers' thinking for years. There is no one 'European' regeneration model, local government structure, or spatial planning system. Policymakers in the UK need to avoid reductionist thinking when they look at 'European' cities, especially when they consider whether policy transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996) is an option. Urban policies that work in a highly devolved context, for example, may not suit cities used to central prescription. Rigorous assessment – not just ministerial enthusiasm – should be the key tool of would-be policy-importers.

How well are we doing?

But how are British cities actually performing against their counterparts in Europe and the US? How are they doing on the key economic, social and environmental outcomes – output, employment, deprivation, quality of life? Even focusing on one – output – it is hard to say for sure. Problems with collecting and comparing data present problems for urban researchers and policymakers. Cities are dynamic economic and social organisms, evolving over time and subject to a number of forces. It is hard to understand these forces, let alone measure them. For example, many commentators argue that 'innovation' is a key driver of cities' economic performance (Parkinson *et al* 2004; Simmie 2004). But it is not easy to capture the different aspects of innovation as they relate to cities, or to quantify these in a satisfactory way (Gordon and McCann 2005).

There are three other big problems with data on city performance, particularly in an international context. First, there is no agreement on the key indicators, and the key economic, social and environmental outcomes that cities should care about. Second, there are holes in many datasets. For example, output data for cities is often not available on a Purchasing Power Parity basis. Simply put, this means we are unable to control for differences in national exchange rates, making it almost impossible to compare the real performance of cities in different countries.

Third, there is no standard international definition of a city. This means that there is no standard set of city boundaries, making it very hard to compare like with like. The New York Metropolitan Standard Area (MSA), used to measure economic trends and indicators, covers the conurbation plus surrounding suburbs. In the UK, meanwhile, statistics for Birmingham cover only a single local authority, which is just a fraction of the wider city-regional economy. 'Underbounding' gives a distorted view of UK city performance, and can make it look as if they are doing worse than they really are.

Apples and oranges

All of which plays havoc with attempts to quantify the relative performance of British cities. Michael Parkinson and colleagues' research for ODPM is a case in point (Parkinson *et al*, 2004). Though the authors acknowledge the limitations of the data, their conclusions suggest that big British cities lag behind their European 'competitors'. The best-performing urban economies are those of German cities like Frankfurt, Munich and Stuttgart (see Table 1).

The UK Government and other key stakeholders have broadly accepted this

analysis (ODPM, 2006b). Take a closer look, however, and a number of problems appear. Several results are counterintuitive, to say the least. Can London really be the twenty-third most prosperous city in Europe? And how does the obscure German city of Karlsruhe come out ahead of Paris?

For starters, the numbers – which measure GDP per capita – are probably tracking the wrong thing. GDP is a poor indicator of international productivity, because taxes and benefits are included in the GDP measure, and the tax burden and generosity of the benefit system differ across countries. A better – and simpler – measure is Gross Value Added (GVA) – but this is not yet available on a pan-European basis. Measuring output per head – as opposed to output per worker – also risks distorting results in favour of smaller cities with a large commuter hinterland.

More seriously, much of the recent comparative research does not compare like with like (Cheshire 2005). Some studies compare single UK local authorities with wider

city-regional and regional units in other countries. Others use NUTS3 units: though these are roughly equivalent to sub-regions, they are defined differently by government statisticians in each EU member-state. This helps to explain why 13 of the top 20 cities in the sample are German.

Other observers have highlighted the definition problem (Freeman 2004). Different data suppliers and statistical organisations tend to define cities in their own way, and produce dramatically different results. The recent EU Urban Audit (CEC 2004) has attempted to set some common standards, but it remains hard to compare EU cities and draw consistent conclusions. In other words, depending on whom you talk to, big German cities are either doing much better than big British cities, a little better, or more or less the same (Table 2, below).

Getting the measure

So where do we go from here? The stylised facts are these: Looking west, big American cities tend to perform strongly on economic measures. But American cities often do much worse than British cities on social cohesion, environmental measures and quality of life. In the US, ‘weak market cities’ (such as Buffalo, Cleveland and Baltimore) are often very weak, with a combination of low output and earnings growth, low employment, population loss, poverty and race-driven differences in educational achievement and life chances (Katz 2006).

Looking east, many big European cities seem to have higher population growth, educational achievement, quality of life and attractiveness to investors, when compared to their UK counterparts (Parkinson *et al* 2004). But European countries are at different stages of the urbanisation process: cities in Spain, for example, are still gaining in population, while

Table 2. Growth in European cities: different views.

City	Supplier 1	Supplier 2	Supplier 3
Frankfurt	69,000	78,000	44,000
Munich	76,000	47,000	41,000
Stuttgart	61,000	63,000	37,000
London	32,000	62,000	25,000
Birmingham	30,000	52,000	-
Manchester	28,000	48,000	-

Source: GLA Economics

Note: Output per employee, measured in Euros, 1995 constant prices.

German cities are experiencing suburbanisation.

There are tentative signs that British cities are doing better than we think. Cities are the building blocks of national economies, and should have a greater share of measures like output and employment than the national average (which includes rural areas). Sure enough, on a simple output score, most UK urban areas heavily outperform the European and British average (Table 3, below). But, even in this most basic, imperfect comparison, in 2001 three major UK conurbations – Liverpool, Sheffield and Tyneside – *underperformed* both the European and British average.

Table 3. UK cities' GVA per capita compared to EU and UK average, 2001.

City	EU score	UK score
London	166	242
Edinburgh	162	154
Nottingham	155	144
Belfast	152	142
Glasgow	151	133
Bristol	140	135
Greater Manchester South	137	118
Leeds	127	117
Cardiff	122	111
Birmingham	114	106
Liverpool	95	92
Sheffield	93	88
Tyneside	92	87

Source: ONS

Note: EU 15, UK average = 100. Data refers to NUTS3 areas, and is workplace-based. London data refers to Inner London NUTS3 area.

It is possible to do some direct comparisons, despite limitations on the data. So far, these suggest that some British cities are doing fine. The GLA Economics' *World Cities* programme is collecting robust, internationally comparable economic data for a select group of UK, European and US cities (Freeman 2004). Preliminary productivity results suggest that cities like Dublin, Stockholm and Helsinki tend to score consistently highly, while British cities like Manchester and Birmingham appear around the middle of the group.

Much of this feels intuitive but it is not easy to prove. Further development work is required before we can confidently compare the economic performance of cities across national boundaries, much less between continents.

It is also important to think about 'performance' in the right way. We have picked a single measure – output – to make a point. In general, we should steer away from league table approaches and single indicators. Successful cities should perform well across the board, with strong economies, viable communities, low levels of deprivation and a good quality of life. Good economic performance underpins all of this, but it is not all there is.

Where next?

So what does this tell us about 'European cities', not to mention the prospects for learning and policy transfer (Kleinman 2002) from the Continent to the UK?

First, there is no such thing as a 'European city' or 'European urban policies' (or an 'American city', for that matter). The physical form, social cohesion and economic performance of cities are shaped largely by history and the interventions of national governments, rather than common 'European' characteristics. British policymakers need to

work harder if they are to understand the different types of European cities. Second, they also need to break out of the simplistic ‘European cities good, British cities bad’ mentality. The data suggests that, despite their many challenges, some UK cities might not be underperforming their Continental cousins as much as some studies suggest. But it is hard to tell. Third, therefore, city leaders and policymakers need more-detailed local knowledge if they want to adapt Continental ideas to the British urban context.

So, on our European policy holiday, here are a few tentative ideas for ‘souvenirs’ to bring home.

Metropolitan governance and spatial planning: many cities on the Continent use formal and informal institutions to ensure that planning and investment are consistent across the real geography of cities, rather than local authority districts alone (Kleinman 2002). We should look at the positive and negative aspects of the *communautés urbaines* of Lyon and Lille, and the metropolitan authorities of Bologna and Brussels, for example, as the debate on city-regions in the UK continues to evolve (Marshall and Finch 2006).

Leadership: across the Continent, cities have mayors; some directly elected, as in Rome, and others indirectly elected (for example, Paris, Berlin). Regardless of the specific governance arrangements, strong executive leadership is visible in most big cities, a clear contrast to the UK.

Public transport and connectivity: Paris, Berlin and Amsterdam, for example, are leaders in integrated, affordable, and reliable urban transport systems. Continental city mayors, together with regional governments, have a great deal more freedom to plan the strategic development of their transport networks. In France, the versement transport – a payroll tax

collected and distributed by regional governments – has enabled large and small cities alike to build tram networks envied across the UK.

Public space and mixed-use development: cities like Amsterdam, Berlin, Barcelona and Valencia show ways to combine good public spaces, high-density urban living and a wide range of other uses in inner urban locations

Innovation: cities like Stuttgart and Helsinki have built up excellent local innovation systems, and have touted their offer to research-intensive businesses, unlike the UK’s more laissez-faire approach.

And what might some Continental cities learn from their counterparts in the UK?

Planning controls: many UK cities have been successful in combating sprawl and large-scale suburbanisation through the use of planning controls, green belt restrictions etc. Some European cities – particularly in the fast-growing south and east – could learn from their experience.

Congestion charging: London’s successful city-centre road pricing scheme is already being examined carefully by many other large cities – and may be the forerunner of schemes elsewhere in Europe.

Translating basic ideas from the Continent into the UK context – and vice-versa – requires a lot more profound thinking. Where policy transfer has worked, it has taken account of historical differences, local political structures, the availability of information and other key factors (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996). In order to grab the best ideas from European cities, British policymakers need to be better informed and better linked to EU-wide networks and debates. They need to get to know Continental cities a lot better. That means deeper thinking, richer data – and a lot more policy tourism. Have a nice trip!

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