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BOOK REVIEW

Innovating in urban economies: Economic transformation in Canadian city regions

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David A. Wolfe (ed.)
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Innovating in Urban Economies is one of four edited collections reporting on a six-year study into innovation, creativity, and governance in Canadian metropolitan areas conducted by the Innovation Systems Research Network (ISRN). The fourteen chapters curated here by series editor David Wolfe provide an examination of the importance of city-regions in facilitating innovation and the productivity of firms operating in such urban agglomerations. The book sits alongside companion volumes on new forms of civic governance (Bradford and Bramwell, 2014), talent attraction and retention (Grant, 2014), and a forthcoming entry that will integrate research findings from across the three project themes. As such, it should be considered as both a stand-alone compilation and a constituent part of a broader book series.

Wolfe's entry point is the assertion that since the most significant factors impacting industrial clusters' innovativeness and productivity are external to the clusters themselves, "the social characteristics, dynamics, and relationships within the wider city-region are important determinants of economic performance" (p. xv). Innovation requires companies to exploit their own internal resources, but also those available externally in their immediate environments, or accessed through regional or global pipelines. The relative importance of local and global knowledge flows and the significance of proximity between clusters are leitmotifs used to conceptually define the characteristics and economic potential of urban economies across the collected essays.

The volume pivots on a central question: are city-regions' innovativeness and resilience best realized through economic specialization – thus reaping the benefits of the Marshall-Arrow-Romer spillovers now backed by the likes of Michael Porter and Ed Glaeser – or regional diversification, as advocated by Jane Jacobs and her acolytes? Wolfe and his collaborators eschew simplistic binary reasoning to present a considered response to this provocation. In his introductory chapter, Wolfe negotiates the economic specialization/diversity dichotomy by forwarding city(-region) size as a constructive means to differentiate urban innovativeness across Canada. Small and medium-sized cities are generally seen as specialized and reliant upon specific locational advantages, while large, globally connected metropolitan centers are (drawing from Pierre Veltz) "Schumpeterian hubs" capable of

“[adapting] rapidly because of their efficiency at coordinating and managing the processes that are the basis of innovation and growth” (p. 17). In the following theoretical chapter, Gregory Spencer develops a schema of symbolic, synthetic, and analytic knowledge bases to codify a statistical overview of the localized knowledge communities driving Canada’s urban economies. His framework complements Wolfe’s approach by bridging the sociology of knowledge production (usually based on organizational studies) and the broader scale analyses prevalent in economic geography.

The book’s substantive empirical contributions are organized into three parts dealing with innovation in Canada’s large, medium, and small cities. Thanks to the ISRN’s project design, the eleven case studies are tied together by a common methodology that establishes an implicit comparative framework and ensures the book’s central question recurs consistently. Taken as a whole, Wolfe has assembled a wealth of material that builds a remarkable portrait of innovation practices throughout a national urban system. We not only visit Canada’s oft-studied global centers but are taken off the beaten track to non-paradigmatic cities such as Halifax, London, Moncton and Trois-Rivières that, while ‘off-the-map’, serve as provocative examples to rethink how drivers of innovation function in differing urban contexts. The case studies are grounded in extensive interview data (drawn from common scripts) and supported by statistical analysis. Readers are rewarded with a rich description of the characteristics, social interactions, and modes of knowledge transfer present within industrial sectors in a range of metropolitan settings. Chapters that allow the voices of research participants to come through first hand (e.g. Neil Bradford and Jen Nelles on London, and Peter Warrian on Hamilton) are particularly strong.

Assessing the case studies’ diverse developmental pathways opens some salient insights, especially when the contributing authors challenge well-worn accounts of innovation in both resource- and knowledge-based urban economies. For example, one can productively contrast Langford, Li and Ryan’s analysis of the deeply-integrated industrial sectors in Calgary’s oil-based economy with Warrian’s account of the influence old-economy labor market institutions have had on new-economy social dynamics in the steel town of Hamilton. Similarly, juxtaposing the central role Warrian ascribes to McMaster and Waterloo universities in bridging Hamilton’s ‘bipolar local economy’ (p.199) with Andrew Munro and Harald Bathelt’s comments regarding the limited impact of university-based start-ups in ‘Canada’s Technology Triangle’ (p.229) raises pertinent question surrounding the capacity of higher education institutions to drive regional innovation systems. Yet while *Innovating in Urban Economies* hangs together on the strength of the ISRN team’s collective research design, the lack of synthesizing chapters, discussions of cross-cutting themes, and the absence of an index – in addition to the fact that the volume’s authors rarely address each other – means readers are tasked with abstracting such comparative lessons from the individual studies.

Philip Cooke closes the collection with a short essay outlining a research agenda premised on knowledge platforms as opposed to knowledge clusters. Noting that despite their empirical richness and theoretical grounding, the volume’s collected case studies “have not yet fully absorbed some of the most significant trends in regional innovation thinking” (p. 357), he stresses the potential of evolutionary economics’ more agency-centered approaches to extend our understanding of the generative capacities of inter-industry knowledge spillovers in regional innovation systems. Cooke concludes with a call for new political leadership capable of cultivating the skills of “urban orchestration” necessary to promote policy resilience in the modern city (p. 365).

Innovating in Urban Economies is a cohesive collection of essays, but the book’s singleness of purpose does inhibit it from engaging a number of vibrant and on-going debates on urban economics and city-regional urbanization. Allen Scott’s notion of ‘cognitive-cultural capitalism’ provides an occasional conceptual touchstone but authors across the board

avoid critiques that assert that city-regions are too often fetishized as sites as innovation and creativity (e.g. Jonas and Ward, 2007). The collection's scope is curtailed by a normative understanding of city-regions (as an urban core tied via functional linkages to an expanding urban hinterland) and a methodological focus on census metropolitan areas (CMAs) as defined by Statistics Canada. This approach provides the ISRN team with a basis for statistical comparison yet it presents readers with a partial and under-theorized approach to the city-regional question. This is to say; there is little sense of the extent to which the city-region (opposed to other scales of analysis) is a necessary or merely contingent territoriality for innovation. There is a subsequent tendency towards discursive and analytical slippages between city-region, city and inner city across, and sometimes within, chapters. For example, Mississauga and Brampton – which with 2011 populations of 713,443 and 523,911 are the sixth and ninth largest municipalities in Canada respectively – are subsumed within 'Toronto' in a manner that does not adequately acknowledge the functional polycentricity or multiscale territoriality of the Greater Toronto Area. Discussions of such inter-regional dynamics and sociospatial differentiation – as well as the broader significance of Canadian provincial and federal policy frameworks – are largely absent. This perhaps reflects the cordoning off of governance issues to either Bradford and Bramwell's edited collection or the book series' forthcoming fourth entry, but some cross-referencing would have enhanced the volume's capacity to directly speak to current intellectual and policy debates, especially in non-Canadian contexts.

Innovating in Urban Economies is successful in illustrating the impact of urban agglomerations' social dynamics on innovation and economic outcomes. The diversity and detail of the cases provides a clear riposte to one-size-fits-all approaches to regional economic development and Wolfe should be commended for organizing such a rigorously focused compilation. The volume's empirical richness alone makes it worth recommending and the book will prove a valuable resource, along with the other entries in the ISRN book series, for those looking to study, understand, and theorize the future of innovation and resiliency in urbanized knowledge economies.

References

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