

## **EVALUATING CULTURE AND REGIONAL ECONOMIES**

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**ABSTRACT:** Culture is in fashion. Creative, innovative, entrepreneurial and other affirmative cultures are the aspirational goals of regions and their developers. Culture, and an espoused need for cultural change, typify regions as diverse as Queensland sugar, the Middle East, and Wales. Culture as a stimulating and progressing environment can energise entrepreneurs and institutions to drive change and regional development.

Such is the fashion. The interplay between culture and regional economic development is the focus of this paper. Ways of developing considerations of culture are examined along with potential modes of analysis. The impacts of culture can be considerable but care is needed in evaluation. Evaluative frameworks need to be well structured if appropriate insights are to be gained into the regional contributions of culture.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Regional scientists are well aware of the context specificity of regional economic development, or the way that economic development solutions are simply not transferable between disparate locations (Batterbury and Hill, 2004).

Even cross-national attempts at capturing the common characteristics of successful places hesitate to generalise about applicability, although there is some consensus around what may be called the themes of regional economic development, ie :

- An agreed vision
- Some degree of local autonomy
- A commitment to growing new or existing small to medium sized enterprises
- Acknowledgement of the roles of knowledge, creativity and research
- A commitment to innovation
- Businesses that are networked
- A commitment to internationalisation (Institute of Welsh Affairs, 2002).

A principal reason for the lack of transferability is culture, variously defined as the collective values and behaviour that separate the group from the species, or as the “*collective programming of the mind which distinguishes one group or category of people from another*” (Hofstede, 1997). This paper will look at the inter-relationship between economy and culture in a spatial context, and will use this to develop some notions that may begin to improve the nature of policy

formulation and application in a manner that goes beyond existing paradigms of regional development.

Culture is usually regarded as an exogenous variable in the analysis of economic development, whilst economic analysis is considered a particular form of social interaction in the understanding of cultural relations. A number of studies have sought to assess the role of culture in organisational development or international business, including business location decisions (such as Doeringer et al, 2004), but there has been little attempt to systematise the relationship between the two, despite Lash and Urry's (1994) assertion that: "*economy and culture no longer function in regard to one another as system and environment*" (p64).

This paper will explore the economy/culture relationship in the context of development policies that typically focus on one or the other, and argues that contemporary government and its policies need to explicitly address the potential complementarity between the two. Governments across the industrialised world are looking to widen the objectives of their development activities to go beyond the simply economic to embrace a spectrum of societal, environmental and cultural aims.

This paper will also look to opportunities to begin to integrate these objectives into a more general approach to policy which may even, if optimistically, be described as holistic. Some general comments will be illustrated with reference to a particular case study – the evaluation of integrated strategies in one region of the UK. Lessons are drawn for potential new ways of looking at development. These are likely to present a considerable challenge to the regional scientist.

According to Giordano (2001) the European Union in particular is witnessing governments and the political process, (as well as academic thought), becoming more sensitive to regional issues, not least because of the rise of regionalist political parties who may themselves be impacting on the (political) culture of regions. Within Australia the same processes may be reflected in the establishment by the Federal Government of the Department of Transport and Regional Services and the funding of various regional bodies. Regions are then high on the political agenda.

Meanwhile the development of cultural strategies for a region or nation is a relatively new phenomenon, largely because the notion that active government may have some opportunities for influencing culture is itself fairly recent. We argue that these developments are not coincidental, with an increasing realisation that culture, however defined, may have dynamic impacts across a range of policy objectives. Until recently approaches to economic development, even at a regional level, have tended to treat culture as a fixed factor, which may help or hinder economic development, but which was an "*uncontrolled*" variable (see for example Armstrong and Taylor, 2003). Similarly the relationship between culture and economy was typically unspecified. However what Galbraith calls the conventional wisdom has begun to change as governments, especially regional ones or those with regional exposures, began to respond to demands for holistic or joined-up strategies and policies. They have begun to recognise that

policy instruments, judicially applied, could impact on a whole range of objectives, from economic development (eg jobs and incomes) to environment (pollution or footprint) to society (cohesion, crime, identity) by including culture as shared values and norms that could both be influenced and influencing.

Day (1998, p 89) talks of the “*cultural turn in social theory*” being matched by a “*communitarian twist in social and political philosophy*”, with influences being evident in political decision making, particularly for the pursuit of sustainable rural development:

*Two particular examples of attempted cultural engineering, centred on ideas of 'enterprise culture' and of 'corporate culture', are reviewed and both shown to be flawed by their weak conception of culture. A more convincing account of its importance is derived from work on regional development which emphasises the role of social networks and institutional thickness in enabling the growth of confidence and trust as preconditions for success. It is noted that these institutional conditions show some surprising similarities to traditional social features of rural areas, and so help explain the shift from failed strategies of rural development towards more integrated approaches. (ibid)*

This paper will proceed by detailing the anticipated relationship between economy and culture in a spatial context before going on to look at the emerging role of culture in the “new economic geography” that seeks to account for the contemporary convergence or divergence of economic activity over space and time. Then the paper will look to the potential role of evaluation (both a culture of evaluation and an evaluation of culture) as a means of linkage between the common objectives of government policy. Finally some conclusions about implications for policy and deliverables are drawn.

## **2. CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE ECONOMY/CULTURE RELATIONSHIP**

According to Mercado, *et al.* (2001):

*Culture is essentially about people and the way in which they behave as a result of their background and group affiliations. It is not about individual behaviour... but about shared systems of meaning within and across ascribed and acquired social groupings. (ibid p 433)*

The authors go on to describe culture in terms of a number of characteristics:

- *Culture is a system of values and social norms (rules and guidelines directing behaviour) shared among a society or group of people...*
- *Culture is not innate but learned...*
- *It is shared, communicated and transmitted by members of a social set and defines the boundaries between groups...*
- *There are various facets of culture, many of which are interrelated... (ibid)*

This then describes culture as a system of learned and shared values that define the boundaries between groups. It is in the sharing of ideas (social learning) that provides a pathway to spatial economics through the notions of

agglomeration and networks. these notions will be explored further in the next section. The issue for now is in understanding various constructions of culture and how these impact on views of the culture/economy relationship across space.

In an informative article, Moulaert and Sekia (2003) critically review territorial innovation models (models of industrial districts, innovation clusters, learning districts and the like) and find them to be conceptually lacking, with their conclusion being that territorial innovation models suffer from “conceptual ambiguity”. This

*is mainly a consequence of the way territorial innovation is theorized, i.e. in terms of technologically driven innovation and a business culture that is mainly instrumental to the capitalist market logic. This pressing ideological priority pushes the ‘conceptual flexibility’ of TIMs across the border of coherent theory building” (p 289)*

According to this work, superficial considerations of culture are one hallmark limitation, culture being defined as functional to improving regional economic competitiveness (p 295). While omission of the wider qualities and considerations of culture is significant, inconsistencies abound even in this reduced usage. For example, interpretations of business culture differ with particular choice of model.

Simonsen (2001) argues that the analyses of economy and culture have edged closer together in recent times, particularly in the study of the spatial relationships that lie at the heart of regional science. In a detailed analysis she suggests that considerations of the economy/culture relationship in this spatial context typically take one of two forms:

- The “culturalisation” of the regional economy – involving the production, distribution and consumption of products and services that can be characterised as cultural; and
- A more instrumentalist perspective that identifies culture with people and places, or in skills and attitudes (such as enterprise or tolerance) that may encourage or constrain economic development.

Culture can then be seen, in the language of economists, as enabling product differentiation and affecting resource quality.

The culturalisation hypothesis provides the basis for a substantial body of recent thought that emphasises competition via cultural production and consumption. Characteristics of this competition include, for example, heritage tourism, cultural festivals and sporting events. The Olympics are seen as positioning first Sydney, and then Athens, as major world cities, cities (or regions) of culture. Simonsen suggests that such articulations blur the distinction between economy and culture, as consumption becomes increasingly “*cultural and aestheticised*”.

Lash and Urry (1994) go further in relating this culturalisation directly to economic development, pointing to the increasing economic importance of knowledge and information (ie media, education etc), information (and symbol) processing activities (such as design, software etc), the issue of lifestyle consumption (referred to by Simonsen (2001, p. 42) as “*the self-construction of identities by de-traditionalised individuals*”) and finally the role of services,

communication and information in the modern economy. Leadbetter (1999) sums this up as the weightless economy, or “living on thin air” in a post-modern, post-industrial society:

*Three forces are driving modern economies - finance, knowledge and social capital. It is no coincidence that all are intangible: they cannot be weighed or touched, they do not travel in railway wagons and cannot be stockpiled in ports. The critical factors of production of this new economy are not oil, raw materials, armies of cheap labour or physical plant and equipment. These traditional assets still matter, but they are a source of competitive advantage only when they are vehicles for ideas and intelligence which give them value.*

One interpretation of this culturalisation is the drive for creative industries, typically defined as those that translate ideas into value-adding products and services. Britain has sought to lead this drive, following the substantial government-sponsored mapping of the creative industries in the UK, establishing a benchmark both for assessing progress in the UK and for other countries to emulate. According to the UK's Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the creative industries are those:

*industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have the potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property* (DCMS, 2001).

In a sense of course all industries are, and must be, creative, with Shumpeter's (1970) creative destruction through competition casting aside those who are slow to change and respond. Innovation is then both a consequence and an imperative of the market economy, with the returns to innovation secured through the protection of intellectual property rights which then assume an importance that may exceed that of physical property.

This leads neatly to the instrumentalist perspective, which sees culture as a characteristic of social space such as the city or region, closely tied to the skills and attributes of individuals (especially the work-force). This characteristic may enhance or constrain the prosperity of the region according to how those people are inclined to enterprising, innovative, hardworking etc. Culture in relation to the economy is then both context-specific and path-dependent, (Simonsen, 2001, p 42). Economic development strategies then require some change or adjustment to culture, encouraging for example more business start-ups or an outward-looking perspective (both found in the recent corporate strategies of the Welsh Development Agency eg *Towards a New Wales*, 2001). Other policy prescriptive work includes the idea of tolerance as a positive cultural attribute that can be related to contemporary economic success, in the development of a “*creative class*” that lies at the heart of future spatial prosperity (Florida, 2002).

Culture as a context-specific attribute can be combined with the notion of agglomeration, (the locational advantages of proximity to other producers) to begin to explain “*the new economic geography*” (see Fujita and Krugman, 2004). This body of thought seeks to analyse the spatial distribution of economic activity in terms of the factors that bring activities together in space (centripetal forces), and those that push them apart (centrifugal forces), summed up in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Forces affecting Geographical Concentration and Dispersion

<i>Centripetal forces</i>	<i>Centrifugal forces</i>
Linkages	Immobile factors
Thick Markets	Land rent/commuting
Knowledge spillovers & other	Congestion & other
pure external economies	pure diseconomies

One important aspect of the instrumentalist approach, widely viewed as bringing culture into economic analysis, is the notion of social networks, or the social relationships between economic agents. The increasing importance of these associational exchanges adds value to proximity, typically expressed in terms of a “new regionalism” that stresses industrial districts, institutional and labour market thickness, or, in one construction, the Learning Region (Morgan, 1997) and its Australian equivalent, the Smart State.

Within these instrumentalist constructions, culture is then a locational attribute that can be attached to spatial units such as the community, firm or region, and may encourage or inhibit economic development according to how it promotes or restricts the informal transfer of knowledge.

### 3. CLUSTERS, AGGLOMERATION AND CULTURE

The notion of clusters has been a difficult one in regional science, with sometimes heated debate about the existence or otherwise of clusters and their amenability to public policy (Whitehurst, 2004). However the economic rationale for clusters as spatial concentrations of economic activity can be traced all the way back to Marshall (1890), who pointed to three characteristics of locality that lead to clusters:

- the availability of pools of specialised labour with industry specific skills,
- access to non-traded common local inputs such as common technology or physical infrastructure, and
- the sharing of ideas and information.

Hence firms in close proximity can gain competitive advantage from agglomeration economies; sharing technical and product knowledge to foster innovation and product development in a manner that overcomes the diseconomies of proximity (as in Table 1).

According to some interpretations of this new regionalism, the next stage in the evolution of regional prosperity will be a focus on economic and social interaction at a local level by companies and organisations who seek markets and ideas on a global scale. To what extent does the localisation thesis and the predicted return to new industrial districts (Amin and Thrift, 1992) reflect a move by firms towards, or a preference for, a (more) common culture? More broadly, does a cluster embody culture in an operationally effective way?

*An industrial cluster is a socioeconomic entity characterized by a social community of people and a population of economic agents localized in close proximity in a specific geographic region. Within an industrial cluster, a*

*significant part of both the social community and the economic agents work together in economically linked activities, sharing and nurturing a common stock of product, technology and organizational knowledge in order to generate superior products and services in the marketplace. (Morosini, 2004).*

The role of culture then lies in the social networks that underpin effective clusters, by providing for the efficient sharing of tacit knowledge through the close personal relationships that proximity engenders. Interestingly, the widespread application of communications technology has not fostered the “*death of distance*” (Cairncross, 1997) but has enhanced the value of personal contacts and the premium placed on both trust and institutional thickness. It may well be that a majority of mobile phone and email traffic complement, rather than substitute for, face to face contact.

According to Gordon and McCann (2000):

*The strength of [an industrial cluster's] relationships is described as the level of “embeddedness” of the social network. In fact, all economic relations..... are socially embedded in the sense that these depend upon norms, institutions and sets of assumptions shared among a group of actors and are not, in themselves, simply the outcome of economic decisions.*

Hence not just the spatial concentration of economic activity but the fundamental nature of market transactions can be attributed to cultural relations. On this prognosis even the most impersonal of internet transactions rely on a set of common values and assumptions, or cultural context, that facilitate exchange. McCann and Shafer (2004) go on to argue that social networks can be the basis for industrial clusters that rely on mutual trust relations between key decision-makers in different firms or organisations, characterised by a lack of opportunism, so that long-term relationships develop which reduce inter-firm transaction costs. Whilst these networks are essentially aspatial, proximity facilitates the development of trust.

This fundamental linking of economy and culture through space may imply that rather than a reductive analysis in the traditions of economics, we be moving towards some integration in the use of constructions of culture and economy in a new post-modern position, i.e. that the separation of notions such as culture and economy into critical parts (de-construction) now being countered by an aggregation into a central whole. In the next section we argue that evaluation provides one such possible integrating mechanism, and one with considerable policy potential in realizing the complementarities between economic and cultural development strategies.

#### **4. EVALUATION AS A LINKING MECHANISM**

Evaluation can be defined as the process of systematically assessing the value or worth of an action, policy or programme. The objective of evaluation is then to arrive at some judgement as to the merit or otherwise of that policy or programme (Bushnell, 1998), normally relating to some non-market activity, since markets themselves typically provide that judgement on trading relationships in terms of profitability or otherwise. Within this broad objective,

evaluations can have different aims, ranging from audit and accountability through performance measurement to the development of learning mechanisms for policy improvement (Aaronovitch, 1997).

The increasing prominence of evaluation can be seen as part of a wider shift towards evidence-based policies and strategies, epitomised by the learning region noted earlier and summed up by Florida (1995), whereby learning becomes both institutionalised and a key source of competitive advantage within the region. Evaluation is central to this process whereby evidence can be used to assess what works in what circumstances. The need to recognise context specificity has given rise to what may be termed realist evaluation, addressing the underlying “*programme theory*” behind policies and programmes in a manner that parallels the notion of construct validity in the assessment of research methodologies (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Focussing on the causal logic that underpins policy provides the potential to assess the relationship between context, mechanism and outcome in a manner that can facilitate policy learning.

Evaluations can be conducted in a number of ways and at different stages during the lifetime of the policy or project. In relation to policies or strategies, four time horizons or phases of evaluation can be distinguished:

- the *a priori* appraisal of strategies before implementation - normally described as what if analysis or scenario planning, often using evidence of previous evaluations,
- formative evaluations to provide on-going real time assessments that can influence policy as it is delivered,
- impact assessments, typically using some model or control group to directly address the counterfactual, and
- reflective evaluations which look back over some policy to draw lessons for the future.

The purpose of this section is to briefly explore the potential for developing an evaluative framework, using all these phases, that gives cognisance to the complementarity between economy and culture and which allows for the capture of spill-over impacts from one to the other. The nature of an evaluative framework is outlined more fully in Hill (2002), from which some principles are set out below, but essentially provides a mechanism for effective knowledge management on multiple levels in a manner that promotes learning and explicitly addresses the counterfactual. See Table 2.

A simple evaluative framework is represented in Figure 1. The cyclic nature of connections is emphasised by the directed arrows. Such a representation can be interpreted in various ways. Selection may be of “a starting point” with different groups or cultures preferring a different starting point. Some may see the tasks as subdivided amongst expert groups while others may expect to embed all parts within a group. Again, differences “in culture” may be claimed as explanatory for the alternative choice preferences.

Reconciling such differences could then involve interlinking the cultures or negotiation between cultures. In a learning approach, or culture, the three stages may be simultaneous, with review and planning taking place alongside programme delivery. Culture then reflects embedded preferences. Explicitly



expressing the various preferences and their combinations can help understanding of not just how groups or views may be different but also how they might be linked.

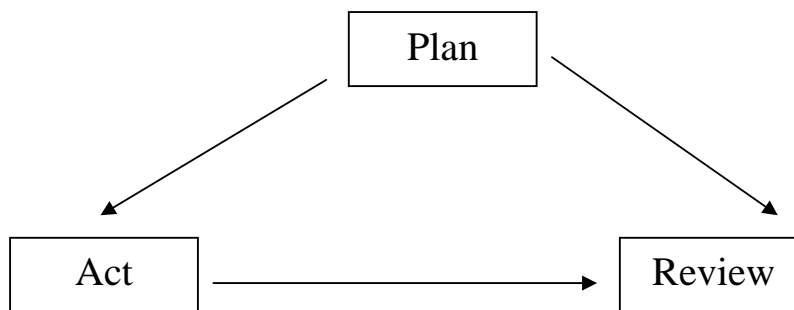
**Table 2.** Principles for an Effective Evaluative Framework

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Open, objective, transparent and simple
Looks forward as well as back
Distinguishes between activities, results and impacts
Impacts expressed in terms of objectives
Allows comparison between activities
Explicitly addresses counterfactual
Adopts minimum number of indicators
Drives policy in pursuit of priorities

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**Source:** Hill (2002).



**Figure 1.** A Simple Evaluative Framework

So far the analysis and commentary have been essentially abstract in nature. Developing an evaluative framework for integrating strategies with economic and cultural objectives may be meaningfully illustrated by reference to one specific strategy at one point in time. In 2002 the (relatively) new Welsh Assembly Government launched “*Creative Future: a culture strategy for Wales*” (WAG, 2002).

This strategy included a firm commitment to developing the evidence base that would allow the impact of the strategy to be assessed:

*The word culture covers a broad area of activity: economic; sporting; social and artistic. While some parts of this activity are well and systematically documented, particularly professional sport, others have too rarely yielded the data for Wales which is necessary to view the true impact of policy.* (WAG 2002, p25).

Hence the strategy explicitly recognises the economic dimension to culture and the need to establish benchmark data if progress is to be measured and assessed. The Welsh Assembly Government has since been involved in developing an appropriate evaluative framework for the culture strategy, due to report in the near future. However the purpose here is slightly different – our aim is to assess the potential for extending a strategic evaluative framework in a manner that can capture the complementarities between economy and culture. The first step in this process, given the objective of a realist evaluation, is to outline the underlying programme theory or logic connecting economy and culture, considered earlier in sections 2 and 3 above.

Following Simonsen (2001), this is summarised in Table 3. Hence an evaluative framework to capture the spillovers between economic and cultural development would focus on measuring and assessing (initially benchmarking) these variables, captured in a range of performance indicators. Exercises such as mapping the creative industries can then be seen as attempts to integrate economic and cultural development policies, whilst impact studies that assess the economic implications of higher education, (discussed from an evaluative perspective by Batterbury and Hill, 2004), play an important role in defining these interrelationships.

**Table 3.** The Economy/Culture Spatial Interrelationship

<i>Culturalisation: cultural products and services</i>	<i>Instrumentalism: culture as regional asset or liability</i>
Cultural tourism	Levels of enterprise
Festivals/events	Tolerance/lifestyle
Creative industries	Information networks
Knowledge/learning as (largely final demand) products	Knowledge/learning as means (or intermediate products)

This is of course not to suggest that these are the only indicators of either economic or cultural development, but rather that these can begin to mark the crossover between the two. Knowledge and learning is common to both constructions of the economy/culture relationship, which may help to explain the significance and esteem of institutions of learning in society.

Recall however that the issue was not one of assessing the empirical extent of the economy/culture relationship in a post-industrial society, but of developing an evaluative framework that would encourage strategic complementarity between the two and would provide the evidence base for resource allocation decisions that maximise overall strategic impact. Achieving this objective implies the development of a basket of performance indicators for, say, economy and culture, alongside the crossover indicators outlined above. Table 4 gives one example of multiple objectives across different dimensions of wellbeing assigned to one strategy – in this case the Welsh Assembly Governments Strategy for Sport and Physical Activity in Wales.

Assessing the relative importance of each is a serious political problem but only for the objective-specific indicators (i.e. those relating to an individual

dimension such as health). Given that the crossover indicators are complementary to common objectives, they will contribute to both. Policies that, say, develop the creative industries will then have positive impacts on both economy and culture, yielding what is in effect a cultural premium to what might otherwise be regarded as an economic development tool.

**Table 4.** The Strategic Objectives of the Welsh Assembly Government's Strategy for Sport and Physical Activity

Health	To increase physical activity across all age, gender and social groups
Economy	To maximise the economic impact of sport and active recreation
Culture	To enrich and develop our cultural and social life
Society	To use sport and active recreation to develop and enhance vibrant communities
Environment	To realise the synergy between sport and natural environment for the people of Wales
World Stage	To enable Wales to succeed systematically at the highest international level where it matters most to the people of Wales

**Source:** WAG, *Climbing Higher*, 2003.

However a major strategic obstacle, quite apart from the composition problems that inevitably accompany multiple indicators, is that of government departmentalisation, generating the kind of silo mentality that prevents joined up actions despite joined up thinking (or even cross-government support). Overcoming this obstacle is a political challenge, well beyond the talents of the analytic academic. The important role of seeking to “shed light” on roles and nuances, including of things like “culture”, remains, particularly for the academic.

## 5. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As has been discussed, culture, or some appropriate change in it, is a common focus in discussions concerning regional development. “The culture” can be termed innovative, creative, entrepreneurial, competitive, trusting or whatever is positive; although negative attributions can also be made. It will be found in networks, clusters or places. Culture may be seen as embedded in products which are viewed generally as authentic, ethnic, local or something similar. “It” is seen as needed for regional development or as somehow lacking in the region. Culture, or a lack of it, is an ingredient in, or an impediment to, regional development.

Place relativities may be explicit or variously attributed. Thus Hildebrand (2002) suggest cultural change for the Queensland sugar industry, current market price problems being then assumed resolvable through the greater efficiency and productivity that arises from a reformed industry culture. In the Middle East (and many other places), culture is a point of tension with the trappings of modernity contrasted with the virtues of tradition. In Wales, an entrepreneurial

culture is assessed and promoted in an attempt to reverse relatively declining economic fortunes (Brooksbank and Evans-Jones, 2003).

At one level such things might be seen as tautologies. If the culture was more appropriate, more acceptable results would follow. Sometimes it is more of an affirmation, a call to greater group belief against the (external) odds. Unfortunately, culture is also sometimes mere platitude, a convenient saying or an excuse for inaction.

Common to this is some imaging of group (or product) identity which is then contrasted, favourably or unfavourably. The group (or product) is located within a culture, as within a place. So constrained and localised it becomes amenable to analytic methods. The group or product becomes an item with properties amenable to analysis, and perhaps change via suitable management, programs or other initiatives. Culture is then a means of expressing some common relativity in relationships or environment.

Two of the important questions that follow are:

- Is culture an inherent, attributed and/or valuable difference, and how might this be decided?
- To what extent can and should culture as the cost of difference be borne, and by whom?

The first is more perceptual, the second more operational. Similarly the various works discussed earlier embody and embed both perceptions and operational considerations. Further distillation of such things would be a useful task, and a step in appreciating the various usages of culture.

There are some further questions associated with the interest in culture by those looking at regional (or other) development issues:

- **A refocussing?** Is the interest in culture part of a bigger interest, a re-appreciation of the importance of context. If so, the death of distance may now be being rivalled by an emphasis on the importance of context, of which culture is king. Have we then just redefined the way we consider similar issues? Having spent a generation (or more) focussing on linear space are we now refocussing on rich place? Is analysis of the separation of persons, items and things now yielding to associations between persons, items and things embedded in place?
- **A missing glue?** To what extent is culture something which is used to hold otherwise disparate instances or individuals together. Culture connects. "It" assists communications, for example, with cultural differences raising problems in for understanding and appreciation.. "It" also allows "aggregation" of disparate things or "averaging" of differences in what is assumed to be a somewhat seamless way.
- **A need for better specification?** Various uses are made of culture. These are sometimes complementary but can often be inconsistent or contradictory. Not only is there a need for examination of definitions, there is need for critical review of the perspectives or theories that underlie the specification. Ways of illustrating how a specification is assembled and its nature need particular care when using something as apparently slippery or nebulous as culture.

- **A recognition of failure, or limited progress?** Despite half a century of often profound efforts, regions and our understanding of them may not have developed as might have been hoped by some in the earlier days of regional science (despite “*The brightest of dawns*”, the title given to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of *Papers in Regional Science*, 2004). Much of the past analysis undertaken now appears, arguably, as somewhat too restricted in formulation and too desirous of determinable outcomes. How will the often preferred abstract perfection of “the science” meet with the more imperfect world of “the practice” and the details or desires of “policy” over the next fifty years?

Thus a return to the central question in this paper of culture and its use in discussions of regional development. This use is wide but not consistent. Culture ranges from something relatively precise about a group or interactions to a general catch-all. Little wonder that culture is both popular and confusing. Further, careful work is needed to position and evaluate culture relative to regional development. Then we might better discern the substance of culture. Policy positioning, in particular, can be expected to benefit from such a step.

Culture is something shared by people, software for the mind, saleable attributes and much more. Such diversity of description and variations in usage point to a central confusion about culture generally, as well as an overall lack of coherent appreciation of culture in regional development. Those interested in advancing regional development and in the effectiveness of regional policies and programs need to recognise culture and its potential contributions more realistically for what they are and reasonably might be. The challenge for those in regional science is to inform thinking about culture and regional development more adequately.

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