

FROM SUSTAINABLE TO RESILIENT REGIONS? SHIFTING CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF REGIONAL FUTURES: A CLOSING REVIEW

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The contributions of this special issue pay tribute to the productive multiplicity surrounding our understanding of regional development. Although traditional theorizing on regional development has its origins in economic theory, the field increasingly incorporates concepts and insights from related disciplines. While economic thinking is recognized as part-and-parcel of the ‘conceptual flow’ prevalent in regional studies, its scholarship tends to keep its eyes wide open theoretically and look far afield conceptually. At the same time, Lagendijk (2006, p. 387) cautions for the risk of sloppy theorizing “by discursively weaving together rather diverse threads of reasoning taken from rather diverse domains [...] in quite a loosely associative, and strongly eclectic fashion.”

This collection of papers largely avoids this trap and demonstrates the virtues of productive multi-disciplinarity as it hones in on the myriad of challenges and complexities found in one particular region, the coal mining area of Latrobe Valley in Victoria, Australia. In toto, the special issue offers a smorgasbord of perspectives that conceptualize regional futures facing this iconic mining and energy generation region, including: history, sustainability transitions, industry restructuring, economic development, regional development, community development, natural resource management, and climate change adaptation. In spite of considerable eclecticism, the suite of contributions seeks to maintain a common ground by shining light on the interrelated, wicked problems and challenges of this Australian coal region in times of low-carbon transition, such as ecological degradation, high unemployment rates and political disengagement. In

doing so, the papers foreground the formidable challenge to conceive of economically and socially just low-carbon pathways for coal regions, their workers and communities.

It would not do justice to the intricacies and nuances of the individual papers to seek to integrate their insights in this closing commentary. In fact, it would be antithetical to the rationale of the special issue to endeavour on such a path. It is, however, loud and clear in delivering the key message that there is no quick, single fix to solve the future of Latrobe Valley. However, this should not serve as a rather lame excuse to ‘miss the boat’ in terms of engaging constructively with real-world problems and simply lament the failings of late capitalism.

Despite their variegation, the papers conjoin in emphasizing the importance of history for regional futures and remind us of the evolutionary, place and path-dependent nature of regional development (Martin and Sunley, 2006). Whereas much of the literature on evolutionary regional development remains quite tightly wedded to an economic understanding of evolutionary processes, this issue invites for a broader debate on regional co-evolution that cuts across economic, social, ecological, political and cultural dimensions.

In my reading, the collection of papers in this issue invite reflection about how we conceptualize and imagine regional futures in Australia along two lines. The first line zooms in on the notion of futures, the second on the notion of regions. Many debates around regional futures situated in the climate change era, draw on notions and ideals of sustainability to imagine and construct future directions for regional development, emphasising social learning and innovation (Truffer and Coenen, 2012). This ‘ecological turn’ opened up a more capacious understanding of innovation, one that includes notions of open, democratic and social innovation, one that is alive to the roles of grassroots movements, user communities and consumer–citizen campaigns for sustainable development (Healey and Morgan, 2012). The suggestions and insights from this issue would not contradict this. They do, however, paint a bleaker, less utopian, feel-good picture of regional futures in the wake of projections of climate change. Some regions, it seems, are in for a rough and bumpy ride. When considering the coming climate crisis, efforts by regions to be innovative,

adaptive and entrepreneurial are not just a matter of opportunity but equally one of necessity, survival and, ultimately, resilience.

Reflecting on the prospects of Latrobe Valley in an age of climate change we may thus need to shift imaginaries about regional futures from sustainable to resilient regions. This is not to deny the importance of climate mitigation action, but rather to acknowledge the profoundly disruptive but equally uncertain impacts of climate change. Albeit still a nascent but growing body of literature, much of the research on resilient regions is still firmly wedded to largely economic understandings of regional development. This issue constructs a darker discourse about the need for innovation, learning and change in resilient regions beyond a prosperity, productivity and competitiveness agenda. It invites application of the concept of innovation truly capaciously on the ways our regional economies, political and institutional structures and, even, landscapes are organized and governed in a hotter, low-carbon future.

This brings us to the second reflection. Why *regional* futures? Various contributions in this issue acknowledge the eurocentrism – or even better, EU-centrism - in a lot of the literature on regional development. This is probably even more the case in relation to the ascribed importance and weight of innovation and learning in regional policy approaches. While there is a valid suspicion about importing European policy fixes, most papers in this issue subscribe to the principles and merits of inclusivity, broad stakeholder participation, and democratic deliberation in designing regional futures. The EU poster-child advocating a participatory, innovation based approach to regional development is called Smart Specialisation.

It is a place-based approach characterised by the identification of strategic areas for intervention based both on the analysis of the strengths and potential of the regional economy for renewal and an Entrepreneurial Discovery Process with wide stakeholder involvement involving the quadruple helix of public-private-academic-civic society. It embraces a broad view of innovation including but certainly not limited to technology-driven approaches, supported by effective monitoring mechanisms. This issue raises a moot question: would this new wave of place-based, future-

facing and seemingly inclusive regional policy work in Australia to inform policies and strategies for regional futures?

Obviously, the notion of regions has a very different meaning in Australia compared to Europe, confined to rural, non-metropolitan places. Following this line of argument, one can indeed be sceptical as to whether there is sufficient administrative capacity and governance capability in Australian regions to design and implement European-style development plans and policies aimed at regional renewal and transformation. On the other hand, smart specialisation builds on a longer tradition of regional experimentalism in Europe. Drawing on the wide variety of regional contexts, EU's smart specialisation approach should thus be conceived as a multi-level governance experiment (Bulkeley and Castan Broto, 2013) that aims to "promote more robust partnerships between the private and public sectors, to facilitate the exchange of know-how within and beyond the region, to promote inter-regional exchanges and benchmarking exercises to overcome parochialism and, finally, to mainstream the positive lessons of the experiment into the conventional Structural Funds" (Morgan, 2004, p. 880).

Such governance forms are by default tentative, emergent and 'in the making' in a time when traditional regional governance structures are in question and experiencing paralysis, contestation and uncertainty. By no means prescriptive or best-practice, smart specialisation experiences in Europe would invite Australian regions (or better even, its city-regions) to join in and share experiences on their journey to construct and govern resilient regional futures designed on principles of inclusivity, broad stakeholder participation and democratic deliberation. This is by no means an easy task considering patterns of embedded and historical regional institutions and their policy lock-in. More theoretically-informed, empirically grounded research on the variety of Australian city-regions is warranted by Australian regional studies to assist with thought leadership in this debate.

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