



The learning region in an age of austerity: capitalizing on knowledge, entrepreneurialism, and reflexive capitalism

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Abstract

A recent round of academic analyses (e.g., Castells, M., 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Blackwell, Oxford) are emphasizing the effective production and translation of knowledge as a critical factor in establishing a sustainable post-Fordist regime. A notable inference of these accounts is that such productions and translations appear to be gravitating towards certain regions. In an emerging regional political economy, illustrious regions in Western Europe and the United States are being hailed as exemplars in terms of convening economic reflexivity, capitalizing on knowledge, and socializing risk. In turn, those less illustrious regions are being summoned to activate interactive learning, reflexive knowledge networks, innovation, and social capital. The author reviews and critically assesses this new regionalist thought in economic geography. He then draws on this to analyze Lowland Scotland's ongoing policy endeavor to establish a new form of 'reflexive capitalism'. In undertaking this he make two claims. First, much of the new regionalist thinking has paid insufficient attention to the intricate social relations between the recent regional renaissance and the restructuring of the state. Second, many of the policy innovations associated with the new regionalism should be seen as running parallel alongside a deeper political effort to 'manage' the erosion of the Keynesian welfarist institutional settlement. In a concluding section drawing on the work of Ulrich Beck, he argues that these emerging *social geographies of reflexive capitalism* require to be highlighted to the extent that they constitute an important sociopolitical backdrop with which to locate the more specific imprint of risk in economic development. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Regions are becoming focal points for knowledge creation and learning in the new age of global, knowledge-intensive capitalism, as they in effect become learning regions. These learning regions function as collectors and repositories of knowledge and ideas, and provide the underlying environment or infrastructure which facilitates the flow of knowledge, ideas and learning (Florida, 1995a, p. 527).

[R]egional institutions *do* indeed matter . . . [However] those analysts who emphasize the role of local or regional institutions to the exclusion of all others . . . do us a disservice that is as great as the denying of any role for regional institutions (Gertler, 1997, p. 56).

1. Reflexive capitalism and the resurgence of regional economies

It is commonplace now to assert that the relative political and economic certainties of the post-war era

of welfare capitalism, and the social and ontological securities¹ that they helped to realize, are but a distant memory (Lash and Urry, 1994; Giddens, 1991; 1998). If we are then to accept that the period since the 1970s has been one of radical restructuring, then we must also accept that academics have now had considerable time to reflect on what may be the emerging social and economic order (Martin, 1989a; Gertler, 1992; Amin, 1994). No one can complain of a deafening silence on this. The transition has been variously described as one from mass production to flexible specialization (Piore and Sabel, 1984); Fordism to post-Fordism (Lipietz,

¹ The concept of 'ontological security' is taken from Giddens (1991, p. 243), and is based on the idea of a "sense of continuity and order in events". More specifically, the term refers to the "confidence that most humans have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (Giddens, 1990, p. 92). My use of the term here is to try to give some impression of the profound impact that the welfare state must have had in terms of providing a 'protective cocoon' – and relief from 'existential anxieties' – through a whole series of social 'guarantees' within the labor market, housing provision, education, and health care.

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1994) or flexible accumulation (Harvey, 1989); organized to disorganized capitalism (Lash and Urry, 1987); and industrial capitalism to the informational age or the network society (Castells, 1996). These labels have been useful in raising our awareness of a whole series of changes in capital and labor markets, corporate strategies, industrial technologies, industrial geographies, financial regulation, labor processes, managerial hierarchies, and the restructuring of the (welfare) state.

However, it has often been the case that such interpretations have tended to fall back on an overly structural analysis: one which presents political economic evolution as a succession of binary histories, themselves translated into a series of systemic ‘models, fantasies and phantoms of transition’ (Sayer, 1989; Amin, 1994). Often these models ignore what may be some extant continuities, rigidities, and contradictions in the prevailing socioeconomic, political and institutional conditions (Hudson, 1989; Gertler, 1992). They have also glossed over many questions relating to the uneven development of new leading edge industrial and institutional innovations (Tickell and Peck, 1992), political struggle (Graham 1992), and gender relations (McDowell, 1991). And in analytical terms, it has been claimed that these approaches have tended to shy away from exploring the dynamic processes, interpretative actions, and situated path dependencies through which particular economic, social, and political forms are constituted (Thrift, 1989; Lash and Urry, 1994; Painter and Goodwin, 1995). A growing acknowledgement of these empirical and analytical anomalies has led some scholars to take a more cautious line to argue that, as yet, western capitalist societies (not to mention those in Eastern Europe), appear to be engaged in an enduring *search* for a new institutional compromise (Peck and Tickell, 1994).

One theorist who has taken this search seriously is Michael Storper (1997). Storper assesses the emerging socioeconomic conjuncture as one of reflexive capitalism. Here, he extends his earlier work on regional economic development, and, in an effort to transcend the structuralist limitations of the above approaches, he places at the very core of his analysis considerations of cognitive reflexivity, human subjectivity and agency (cf. Beck et al., 1994; Lash and Urry, 1994; Cooke, 1997)². Storper defines contemporary reflexive capitalism as:

...a system that manufactures new kinds of risks (economic, personal, ecological, psychological, social, etc.). In the economic sphere, these risks are expressed through the redefinition of competition – what it takes to win and how it is possible to lose. Winning has become a much more complex target, because the conditions which a firm, region, or production system must now satisfy in order to win are manufactured and remanufactured more thoroughly and more rapidly than ever before, creating a moving target for success and a shifting minefield of risks of failure (Storper, 1997, p. 30).

He further contends that such reflexivity represents a notable qualitative shift in capitalism, where agents (firms, governments, development agencies, families and individuals) are increasingly required to contrive a diversity of context-specific ‘frameworks of action’ so as to co-ordinate and manage contemporary conditions of economic uncertainty and risk (Storper, 1997, p. 44-7). To help analyze these ‘microfoundations of the reflexive turn’, Storper draws on the French theory of *conventions*. Reflecting something of a contrast to the more macro-level French *Regulation Approach* to political economy, conventions theory looks to uncover the micro-social regulations that coordinate economic actors’ collective identities and their modes of economic participation (Storper, 1993; Storper and Salais, 1997; Jessop, 1997b). Conventions themselves are seen to represent the “codes, channels of interaction, and ways of organizing and coordinating behaviors that make learning possible” (Storper, 1992, p. 85), and which “render accessible or deny access to [the] different ... frameworks of action” enacted by particular agents (Storper, 1997, p. 45). For Storper, this incarnation of appropriate conventions and economic action frameworks is critical in the formulation of knowledge-based continuous innovation and learning-based competitiveness.

But Storper also draws attention to the geography of these processes in that much of his theoretical endeavor is engaged in a demonstration of how these conventions, action frameworks, and knowledge networks often assume a structured coherence around particular ‘resurgent’ regions. This territorial ordering of product innovation, learning technologies, and social interaction networks in turn helps to define specific regionalized ‘worlds of production’ – or learning-oriented production systems – within some notable dynamic districts such as Northeast Central Italy and Ille-de-France. Abstracting from these localized experiences, Storper then goes as far as to argue that the region itself now represents a critical source of capitalism’s ‘becoming’ (development), and “a key, necessary element in the ‘supply architecture’ for learning and innovation” (Storper, 1995, p. 210).

² In their wide-ranging book on contemporary society, (Lash and Urry, 1994, p. 5) also make the argument that much of the ‘turn’ towards reflexivity tends to focus overly on ‘cognitive reflexivity’, which they define as a “matter of ‘monitoring of self and of social-structural roles and resources’”. However, for Lash and Urry this does not take sufficient account of what they term aesthetic reflexivity, which is grounded in self-interpretation, hermeneutical ‘pre-judgements’, as well as the ‘expressive component’ of goods and services, particularly those in the arena of the culture industries.

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