

BOOK REVIEW SECTION

Lang, T. and Görmar, F. (eds.): Regional and Local Development in Times of Polarisation: Re-Thinking Spatial Policies in Europe. Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 382 p.

The neoliberal turn in the late 1980s and its effects on the regional development and cohesion policy of the European Union are widely discussed issues in academic forums. Though the European Union still addresses spatial equity through redistribution by “strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion” and “reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions” (European Union 2012, p. 127), embracing neoliberal ideology has led to new approaches in European and national policy making. Post-2000 events such as the 2008 economic crisis and the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, the Europe 2020 Strategy and its Territorial Agenda have strengthened the promotion of neoliberal principles including regional competitiveness, innovation and economic growth. Under these circumstances, a total sum of 13 new Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states joined in 2004, 2007 and 2013,

and their incorporation posed new challenges to EU cohesion policy due to institutional and infrastructural weaknesses and low levels of economic development in certain areas. The development of the European Community has been spatially uneven since its very foundation in 1957, but the above policy changes have led to increasing regional polarisation in the last three decades. It is now proven that community- and national-level policies affect regions very differently, even if these policies are designed to ensure equal treatment across space. In addition, the outcomes and success of these policies largely depend on the quality of governments at various territorial levels (European Commission 2017). Therefore, it is crucial to understand how uneven development and regional polarisation in Europe work out at different scales and at different places, and how policy making and governance shape these processes.

Such issues with regard to European cohesion and regional policy are in the scope of the current edited volume. It was published as part of the “New Geographies of Europe” series, which draws on contemporary research exploring the production and reshaping of space from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective. The editors of the book are both outstanding researchers in the field of regional development and policy. Thilo LANG is head of department at the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Leipzig, and lecturer at the Global and European Studies Institute of the University of Leipzig, while Franziska GÖRMAR is project manager and research fellow at the same institute. Including them, altogether 32 authors contributed to the 15 chapters of the book, among whom several disciplines and scientific domains are represented, i.e. geography, regional economics, spatial planning and policy, sociology and political science, international studies, urban studies, social anthropology as well as political science. It is also notable that within the group of authors, there is a balance between experienced scholars and early-career researchers and PhD-students.

This book discusses socio-spatial polarisation and uneven development from a critical point of view, using spatial justice (HARVEY, D. 1973; SOJA, E. 2010) as a core concept, paying special attention to CEE regions. Its main objectives can be summarised in three points. First, to problematise the concept of European regional and cohesion policy, and to reveal the underlying mechanisms of policy making at various scales and



in different geographical and institutional contexts. Second, to discover in which ways socio-spatial polarisation is reproduced in global financial capitalism, with special attention to how power relations and institutional frameworks contribute to this process. Third, to scrutinise how policy should respond to polarisation processes, and to search for alternatives to the neoliberal mainstream.

The book has a sum of 391 pages, from which – not considering bibliographic data, acknowledgement, contents, notes on contributors, lists of figures and tables – the chapters cover 382 pages. Besides the introductory chapter, the book consists of four major parts. The first part engages with European power structures and investigates their role in the reproduction of socio-spatial polarisation. Within this part, Chapter 2 is a conversation between Ray HUDSON and John PICKLES based on their seminal works. The two scholars emphasise that uneven development is inherent to capitalist economies, and it goes hand in hand with power asymmetries and democratic deficit, which manifest themselves in policies favouring urban growth centres. Therefore, they call for an explicitly political economic geography because geographers need not only to understand uneven and combined development and polarisation processes, but to promote and support more progressive forms of capitalism and more just alternatives to economic development.

In Chapter 3, Costis HADJIMICHALIS investigates how imaginations of peripherality shape development theories and policies, and how theories and policies contribute to deepening unevenness and peripherality. The author points to some conceptual and methodological limitations of the dominant understanding and measurement tools of unevenness, discussing the impacts of neoliberalism on EU regional policies, especially their reorientation towards regional competitiveness, innovation and growth. According to HADJIMICHALIS, this is a source of discrepancy with regard to cohesion funds: they seek neoliberal macro-economic policies that impose austerity, while pursuing solidarity and economic and social cohesion. He criticises European elites because they have de facto accepted the idea of “multi-speed Europe” (p. 73) and uneven development. Unfortunately, HADJIMICHALIS continues, against the hardly accountable EU political elites, mainly extremist right-wing and populist political forces have stood up with more success. Therefore, in his conclusion, he calls for an alternative to current elitist policy making and the neoliberal mainstream in the EU.

In Chapter 4, Merje KUUS makes three points. First, she points out that European spatial planning has become transnational, inasmuch as it is mainly shaped by cross-border networks and interpersonal relationships. Second, though European policy making is transnational, national belonging still matters: diplomats’ attitudes are rooted in their national po-

litical cultures, and while there are uniform protocols and communication in the EU, national habits are hard to discard. For doing ‘Brussels diplomacy’, special skills are required, and richer countries have considerable advantage in this respect: with better universities they can train better professionals and diplomats. That is why KUUS argues that transnational policy making contributes to the reproduction of unevenness amongst member states. Third, engaging with research methodology, she suggests that European policy making cannot be successfully analysed along rigid EU/member states and member state/member state boundaries, but transnationality should be firmly considered in research strategies.

Chapters in the second part discuss European and regional policies and their impact on territorial cohesion within and between EU member states. Chapter 5 (Rhys JONES, Sami MOISIO, Mikko WECKROTH, Michael WOODS, Juho LUUKKONEN, Frank MEYER and Judith MIGGELBRINK) contains a critical analysis of the idea of territorial cohesion, and a discussion of conceptual and policy benefits of the idea of spatial justice. The authors argue that cohesion policy is an elusive and complex concept, giving space to various interpretations or even to manipulations for the purpose of national and regional development priorities. Therefore, placing the concept of spatial justice into the centre of development policies would facilitate wider regional social coalitions, focusing on the capabilities of the given area, and not only considering regions as mere recipients of external financial and institutional support. In Chapter 6, Bradley LOEWEN and Sebastian SCHULZ investigate how EU cohesion policies work in four countries: Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia. Their analysis corroborates the existence of discrepancies between cohesion and innovation policies in the case of CEE regions. The main reason behind this phenomenon is the high level of polarisation, since more developed regions have more potential to benefit from innovation policies due to their more sophisticated institutional frameworks. The main conclusion of this chapter is that the relationship between the European Innovation Policy and the Cohesion Policy should be made transparent for which the authors provide two alternatives. The first one is separating the two policies, so the Innovation Policy could become the EU’s economic policy and the Cohesion Policy could refocus on infrastructure and social investment in underdeveloped regions, while the second alternative considers Innovation Policy as the economic strategy of the Cohesion Policy, with equal standing alongside social and environmental strategies.

In Chapter 7, Stefan TELLE, Martin ŠPAČEK and Daniela CRĂCIUN analyse the objectives of European development strategies at different territorial levels. First, they compare the Lisbon Strategy and the Europe 2020 Strategy, and second, they exam-

ine all the cross-border development programmes launched in Czechia and Germany in the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 financial periods. According to their results, at the macro level there is a shift between the Lisbon Strategy and Europe 2020 in their objectives from employment and social issues towards growth and innovation, considering productivity and efficiency the bases of better cohesion. Regarding cross-border programmes, the authors observe divergence between old and new member states: while the former promote neoliberal, competitiveness-centred policies, the latter rather intend to achieve growth and cohesion through employment and labour market participation. Therefore, the authors' recommendation is that differences in national interests and development paths need to be considered in European policy making. Furthermore, regulations on cross-border cooperation should be more flexible and better promote institutional capacity building. In Chapter 8, JÓZSEF BENEDEK, ȘTEFANA VÁRVARI and CRISTIAN MARIUS LITAN focus on Romania's Growth Pole Strategy for the 2007–2013 period. On the one hand, adopting quantitative methods, they analyse the impacts of growth poles on regional inequalities. On the other, they conduct a qualitative analysis to discover how the idea of growth poles is echoed by the objectives of Romanian development strategies. Their results point to the failure of the Growth Pole Strategy, inasmuch as it has not reduced regional inequalities in Romania. The authors' conclusion is that the Growth Pole Strategy is a "good example of the Europeanisation process" (p. 188) but general guidelines and principles of European spatial planning documents should have been adopted in a more critical way, taking national peculiarities into account.

In Chapter 9, ZSUZSANNA PÓSFAY and CSABA JELINEK discuss the effects of Hungarian housing policies on socio-spatial polarisation for the post-2000 period. Here, the reader is introduced to the dual character of post-socialist Hungarian housing policy: each policy introduced after 1990 either supported relatively well-off middle classes, officially providing equal access for everyone ('liberal' elements of Hungarian housing policy), or served to cater to the housing needs of the least affluent people ('socialist' elements). Although the currently dominant liberal housing policies are considered geography-blind by many, the authors demonstrate that these policies have considerable spatial effects and they reproduce pre-existing socio-spatial inequalities. Their main argument is that Hungarian liberal housing policies serve to channel financial resources towards better-off middleclass households, while marginalising low-income households. Therefore, public policies contribute to the social and spatial polarisation of Hungarian society. Increasing financialisation and the new housing schemes (together with the current economic upturn) have led to the rocketing of property prices, particu-

larly in urban centres, while housing markets in many rural and underdeveloped areas have been left without considerable external resources.

The third part of the book focuses on micro-scale strategies adopted by regional and local actors – e.g. individuals, enterprises, communities – to cope with the effects of polarisation. Chapter 10 (AURA MOLDOVAN) discusses the demographic and economic challenges faced by Romanian rural communities (Sălaj/Szilágy County), with special attention to selective out-migration. In particular, MOLDOVAN scrutinises why people choose migration as a strategy to cope with the negative consequences of peripherality, and how out-migration influences local political leaders and their development strategies. From this chapter, it turns out that the group of out-migrants is not homogeneous and many of them are still attached to their place of origin after making a living elsewhere. The most important lesson from this chapter may be that selective out-migration increases the dependency of the affected communities on EU support and thus local leaders are often pushed to adopt special application strategies to accumulate financial resources. In Chapter 11, SORIN CEBOTARI and MELINDA MIHÁLY present two development projects implemented in peripheral communities in Hungary and Romania. It is shown that officially both projects are community initiatives but due to the extreme low level of civic activity in these areas, they are practically initiated and managed by the local mayors. The authors' conclusion is that broader public participation in local projects would be a key step towards the empowerment of such communities and could be an antidote to peripheralisation. Therefore, the concept of community and the role of local communities in development need to be revisited, and new policy-making mechanisms should be developed, involving regional and local actors.

In Chapter 12, MARTIN GRAFFENBERGER scrutinises the innovation strategies of two low-technology enterprises located in peripheral Estonian and German regions. The main question addressed by GRAFFENBERGER is how intra-firm capacities and network relationships can counterbalance the unfavourable effects of peripherality. Based on these two cases, the author argues that for enterprises operating in peripheral regions, a two-folded strategy might be fruitful: on the one hand, building multiple and diverse internal capacities (e.g. diversifying production portfolio; technological absorption), on the other hand, establishing multi-scale external cooperation (with local, regional, national and international partners). In Chapter 13, BIANKA PLÜSCHKE-ALTOF and MARTIENE GROOTENS investigates the role of local actors' agency, using the concepts of leadership and place-making as analytical lenses. Though the authors agree that image building may function as a possible solution to challenges of regional polarisation, they also empha-

size the limitations of such strategies: the idealisation and responsabilisation of local leadership can turn into the blaming and scapegoating of those who are less willing or able to participate. In addition, agency-based approaches may draw the attention from the structural conditions of peripheralisation. Finally, the authors emphasise the responsibility of researchers in the discursive re-making of peripheries, and they recommend a more dynamic and processual understanding of place and periphery.

In the last part of the book, the main results of the preceding chapters are summarised and recommendations for policy makers and researchers are provided. First, Garri RAAGMAA, Erika NAGY, Franziska GÖRMAR and Thilo LANG discuss the main contributions of the book in six points: (1) the regional policy paradox in the EU (i.e. growing regional polarisation despite financial support for less-developed regions); (2) the recent administrative (re-)centralisation trends in Eastern Europe; (3) globalisation and regional industrial restructuring causing further polarisation, in which CEE developed to a semi-periphery, specialised in labour-intensive activities; (4) the mechanisms that produce inequalities; (5) the production of inequalities through social practices and discourses; and (6) methodological considerations and issues related to researchers' positionality. In the last chapter, Sorin CEBOTARI, Tomas HANELL and Thilo LANG formulates policy recommendations for EU, national and regional/local actors. These point to (1) the need to place spatial justice into the centre of EU cohesion policy; (2) the involvement of regional and local actors in policy making; (3) the role of national-level governments to participate in establishing support infrastructure at lower territorial levels; (4) the significance of fostering human capital at the local level (e.g. by allocating resources for training in EU-funded projects); (5) the ways of how policy making and programming should be promoted at the local level.

To conclude the review, the volume "Regional and Local Development in Times of Polarisation. Re-Thinking Spatial Policies in Europe" undoubtedly holds a great scientific value. Uneven development and regional polarisation are multi-scalar and complex processes and the editors of the book successfully tried to grasp this complexity. Their efforts are mirrored by the diversity of the studies in terms of the scale of analysis (from the European to the local/micro), the applied methods (e.g. content analysis, qualitative interviews, computer-assisted text analysis – CATA, statistical methods) and the actors involved in the research (e.g. EU policy makers, entrepreneurs, local political leaders). They not only discuss the symptoms and impacts of regional polarisation but also engage with the reasons and the power relations and political structures behind, making a step forward to understand contemporary capitalism and transform it to a more progressive one.

Nowadays, it is especially important to think about such issues, seeing the signs of the possible next economic recession (e.g. Brexit, slowdown of the German economy, the USA-China trade war), and considering the preliminary policies of the EU for the 2021–2027 period (among which innovation and competitiveness will probably remain key elements). Therefore, I wholeheartedly recommend this book, not only for scholars in the fields of regional development and policy, spatial planning and geography, but for all those who want to better understand the spatial dynamics of contemporary Europe.

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