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Rebalancing the Spatial Economy: The Challenge for Regional Theory

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En réponse à la crise de 2008 et au marasme économique qui a suivi, le gouvernement du R-U a attaché une importance capitale à la nécessité de 'rééquilibrer spatialement' l'économie, de réduire sa dépendance à l'égard de Londres et du Sud-Est en rendant les grandes villes situées dans le nord du pays des 'forces motrices'. Ce présent article affirme que le problème du déséquilibre économique spatial au R-U est en fait un problème de longue date, dont la persistance même soulève des questions clés en ce qui concerne les théories d'aménagement du territoire et de politique régionale. On affirme que ni la nouvelle économie spatiale, qui est obsédée par la notion d'agglomération, ni les études régionales, fortes de leur multitude de notions et de paradigmes, mais faisant défaut d'intégration et de synthèse, ne fournissent de base particulièrement convaincante pour l'élaboration des politiques susceptibles de rééquilibrer le territoire économique au R-U.

En 2008, le gouvernement britannique a attaché une importance capitale à la nécessité de 'rééquilibrer spatialement' l'économie, de réduire sa dépendance à l'égard de Londres et du Sud-Est en rendant les grandes villes situées dans le nord du pays des 'forces motrices'. Ce présent article affirme que le problème du déséquilibre économique spatial au R-U est en fait un problème de longue date, dont la persistance même soulève des questions clés en ce qui concerne les théories d'aménagement du territoire et de politique régionale. On affirme que ni la nouvelle économie spatiale, qui est obsédée par la notion d'agglomération, ni les études régionales, fortes de leur multitude de notions et de paradigmes, mais faisant défaut d'intégration et de synthèse, ne fournissent de base particulièrement convaincante pour l'élaboration des politiques susceptibles de rééquilibrer le territoire économique au R-U.

Résumé

En respuesta a la crisis de 2008 seguido por una profunda recesión, el Gobierno británico ha otorgado una importancia crucial a la necesidad de 'reequilibrar espacialmente' la economía, de reducir la dependencia con respecto a Londres y el Sudeste al convertir a las grandes ciudades situadas en el norte del país en 'fuerzas motrices'. Este artículo afirma que el problema del desequilibrio económico espacial en el Reino Unido es en realidad un problema de larga data, cuya persistencia misma plantea cuestiones clave en lo que respecta a las teorías de ordenamiento territorial y de política regional. Se afirma que ni la nueva economía espacial, que está obsesionada con el concepto de aglomeración, ni los estudios regionales, que abundan en conceptos y paradigmas, pero carecen de integración y síntesis, proporcionan una base particularmente convincente para la elaboración de políticas susceptibles de equilibrar el territorio económico en el Reino Unido.



Keywords

Acknowledgements

This is a revised version of an Invited Opening Plenary Paper given at the Regional Studies Association Winter Conference on Sustainable Recovery? Rebalancing, Growth and the Space Economy, London, 27–28 November, 2014. The invitation encouraged me to be provocative and to raise issues that might stimulate debate more widely across the conference. This I tried to do. To that end, the paper is deliberately discursive in nature, and is not intended to be a closely argued piece of empirical analysis or theoretical exegesis, but rather retains the more open style in which it was originally delivered. I am grateful to the Regional Studies Association for the invitation to present the paper, and for the various responses I received from participants at and after that event. I also wish to thank Harry Garretsen (Groningen University), who looked particularly at my comments on the new spatial economics. In addition, two referees provided insightful comments which helped to sharpen the paper. To have responded to the issues they raised in detail would have required an even longer paper – indeed several papers! Of course, none of the above is responsible for the views expressed herein, which are mine alone, and, moreover, do not necessarily reflect those of the Regional Studies Association.

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4. In essence, this policy model was a combination of restrictions on new and expanded factory development in the south east of the country (Industrial Development Certificates) combined with various capital grants for investments in premises and equipment made in the designated assisted areas of northern and peripheral UK.

5. Various estimates have been made of the numbers of new jobs created by regional policy in the depressed areas of the UK from the 1950s to the end of the 1970s. But producing such estimates is fraught with methodological problems, not least agreeing a meaningful counterfactual of what employment trends in these assisted regions would have been in the absence of policy.

6. Of course, these broad regional disparities conceal significant intra-regional inequalities: this has always been the case. But the relative incidence of richer and poorer localities across the regions still maps out a broad north-south geography, even if that geography is (inevitably) complex. Further, whilst indicators such as GDP and GVA are typically used to measure regional disparities, they capture only certain facets of local economic performance and activity, and as such do not convey the full range of factors that determine 'well-being' and 'quality of life'. Nevertheless, there is typically a strong correlation between local GDP per head and local variations in health, educational attainment and the like.

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11. In fact not dissimilar concerns were raised some 40 years ago by [MAGNIFICO \(1973\)](#). He queried whether the European nations met the criteria necessary for successful monetary union, in part because of regional disparities in economic performance and inflation proneness across member states.

12. Among the relatively few remaining stalwart torch bearers, David Harvey of course stands out (eg [HARVEY, 2006](#)).

13. Both Porter and Florida have become something of global 'policy celebrities', consulted by governments around the world eager to find the 'magic bullet' of local, city and regional economic success, in the first case by promoting clusters, in the second by attracting the so-called 'creative' classes and industries.

14. See [PALAN \(2010\)](#) for a useful evaluative survey of the range of different measures that have been used to measure structural specialization and diversity.

15. For an interesting approach to measuring and tracking how national regional and city economies 'fit into' product and technological space, and how the complexity of that fit seems to be correlated with economic success, see [HAUSMANN et al. \(2013\)](#).

16. One of the earliest attempts to emphasize the combined nature of uneven regional development, drawing on a fusion of Harrod-type economic growth and instability

theory, a causation, is [HOLLAND \(1985\)](#). He draws on the work of several ideas into a single framework, which offers several valuable lessons.

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national and international systems of interactions and dependencies. A contemporary



example of what I have in mind is STORPER et al's ([2014](#)) comparison of Los Angeles and San Francisco.

20. The first experiment to revive the depressed northern areas of Britain was the Industrial Transference Scheme, initiated in 1928. This 'move workers to the work' policy sought to move unemployed workers from the structurally declining coalfields in northern regions to employment opportunities in the more prosperous south. It was not a great success, and was followed, in 1934, by the Special Areas Act, in effect a 'move work to the workers' policy since it aimed to attract new industrial investment to the depressed areas.

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