



BOOK REVIEW

THREE BOOKS, ONE MESSAGE: EUROPE'S FORGOTTEN REGIONS CAN BE INNOVATIVE, TOO

With a review of:

Filipe TELES, Carlos RODRIGUES, Fernando RAMOS and Anabela BOTELHO (eds), *Territorial Innovation in Less Developed Regions: Governance, Technologies, and Sustainability*, Palgrave Macmillan, London/New York 2023, 305 pages, Matthias KIESE, Rasmus BECK, Dirk FORNAHL and Christian KETELS (eds), *Beyond Innovation Hotspots: Clusters for Competitiveness and Transformation in Real Regions*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham 2024, 216 pages, and María del Carmen SÁNCHEZ CARREIRA, Paulo Jorge Reis MOURÃO and Bruno BLANCO-VARELA (eds), *European Regional Policy and Development: Forgotten Regions and Spaces*, Routledge, Abingdon 2024, 220 pages

1. INTRODUCTION

Silicon Valley, Greater London, Bavaria... When it comes to regional innovativeness, one often comes across the same success stories. Notably, metropolitan regions with a diverse knowledge base and high-quality amenities are considered the breeding places of innovation. The traditional explanation is that such areas benefit from agglomeration economies, they are in demand by talents, and offer



© by the author, licensee University of Lodz – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)
Received: 07.05.2025. Accepted: 12.05.2025.

Funding information: Stichting Stad en Regio. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

a well-functioning ecosystem of entrepreneurs, knowledge institutes and government actors. Modern urban scaling research, an interdisciplinary approach linked to the Santa Fe Institute, seems to support this view. Using extensive data sets, urban scaling scientists have demonstrated that there is a nonlinear relationship between metropolitan regions and innovativeness (Bettencourt and Lobo, 2016). For example, New York appears to produce twice as many innovations per capita as cities half its size. There is also an ‘urban premium’ for the US as a whole. This ‘law of urban scaling,’ as the regularity is called, also applies to European regions, although the metropolitan privilege effect is smaller than in the US.

As interesting and relevant as this research is, it also raises questions. Is innovation reserved for affluent metropolitan regions? And what can ‘ordinary’ regions that are less densely populated and less developed do with the findings? Should they resign themselves to the fact that renewal happens elsewhere and just not worry about innovativeness? The fact is that the literature on territorial innovation has traditionally been dominated by authors who themselves are based in metropolitan regions, such as Richard Florida (Toronto), Ed Glaeser (Boston), and Philip McCann (Manchester). Even in the small Netherlands – no more than a big city in the eyes of many foreigners – we see this ‘metropolitan bias’: many of my Dutch colleagues prefer to study the regions around Amsterdam, Utrecht, and Brainport Eindhoven rather than those on the edges of the country, such as Twente, Limburg, and Zeeland. Ironically, one could say that researchers are mainly guided by phenomena that occur on their doorstep. But is that the whole story? Does it do justice to the practice of regional innovation? In this essay, I will discuss three edited volumes that suggest the opposite: that also ‘forgotten regions’ can be innovative.

2. TOP LED, BOTTOM FED-POLICY

Edited by professors Teles, Rodrigues, Ramos and Botelho – all linked to the University of Aveiro – the first reviewed book contains a collection of papers following the Portuguese and EU-funded CeNTER (Community-led Networks for Territorial Innovation) – a research project on innovation policies in less developed areas. The central question is how regions that are less fortunate can be encouraged to innovate. The starting point is the idea that less privileged territories benefit from place-based and community-based innovation, i.e., an approach that starts with the local assets and considers the capabilities of the community. The book contains a total of 14 chapters divided into three parts, and features a diversity of authors. Many regional case studies from Portugal are included, but the volume also contains reflections of a conceptual and theoretical nature. Within the short scope of this review, it is not possible to cover all the contributions. Instead, I have selected a few chapters that struck me the most.

In their contribution to the first part of the book ('Models'), Morgan and Henderson argue that old industrial regions can indeed be innovative. However, innovation in these places must be understood in a broad sense: in areas with an industrial past it is often social innovation and renewal in the foundational economy that are important. Moreover, it should be recognised that such regions are not always optimally equipped in institutional and political terms to benefit from innovation policies. This calls for a highly spatially sensitive approach. I also found the chapter by Oliveira and her colleagues in the part 'Tools' of the book quite interesting. They describe their experiences with the CeENTER app, a digital platform to bring together actors in a regional innovation system, and show how this User-Centered Design tool has served well in Portugal's Centro Region to foster innovation. Apparently, also in this domain the virtual world can complement the physical one well. In the book's third part ('Policy and Actors'), the chapter by Almeida, Daniel and Botelho is inspiring. Using four Portuguese cases, they argue that local governments – contrary to the community-led perspective – can indeed be the driving forces in a regional ecosystem. The value of the local public sector lies in its ability to design and boost the system, among other things by providing funds and other incentives. Apparently, effective innovation policies in less developed regions require a subtle mix of top-down and bottom-up elements, resulting in a kind of 'top-led, bottom-fed' approach.

The other chapters in the book are well worth reading, too. Some contributions address the link between innovation and sustainability issues in less fortunate regions, while others deal with the role innovation might have within European cohesion policy and the importance of multi-level governance. The edited volume stands out for its strong interdisciplinary perspective, which is reflected in the variety of backgrounds of the authors: not only geographers, sociologists, and economists have contributed, but also numerous other social scientists and colleagues from technical fields. Innovation and innovation policy is simply too multifaceted to be left to one discipline. This is also one of the things that stays with me after reading the book: only through an interdisciplinary approach and dialogue between science, practice and policy is it possible to develop effective innovation policies for Europe's disadvantaged regions.

3. BEYOND INNOVATION HOTSPOTS

Since business strategist Michael Porter introduced the cluster concept in the early 1990s, numerous European regions have set up cluster policies. Initially, still referred to as 'industrial clusters', those groupings were soon seen as drivers of regional innovation because they were mostly geographical concen-

trations bringing innovative firms, suppliers, governments and knowledge institutions together. Are such 'innovative clusters' also valuable for regions facing economic challenges due to their peripheral location or industrial past? And if so, what can actors do to make them flourish? This is the question the book *Beyond Innovation Hotspots* – edited by the German cluster experts Kiese, Beck, Fornahl and Ketels – explores in nine chapters by analysing regions that are usually overlooked in the literature on territorial competitiveness. For instance, for some readers it will come as a surprise that Bulgaria has a dynamic fintech cluster and that the German Black Forest-area has many 'hidden champions in sleepy villages.' Besides, the book contains chapters on classic cases, such as the Ruhr Area and the success of Danish cluster policy. What new insights does the book offer on the cluster concept?

In this respect, three chapters stand out for me: chapters 2, 6, and 8. To start with, I enjoyed reading chapter 2 by Ingstrup, Morrison and Mayer on the decline of clusters in 'thin' regions, that is non-urban areas which, among other things, lack well-developed knowledge and innovation infrastructures. Referring to case studies of the forestry cluster in northern Sweden, the footwear cluster in the southern Italian region of Apulia and coal production in Slovakia's Nitra territory, the authors show that thin regions either need to diversify their economic structures or establish connections with the outside world in order to access new knowledge and technology. I also found chapter 6 by Weingarten an original contribution, because he introduces a surprising actor in the cluster debate, namely trade unions. Referring to the Ruhr Area, he highlights the importance of 'preventive cluster policy,' i.e., involving workers' organisations in thinking about the transformation and future of traditional industries. Of course, not everywhere in Europe trade unions are as influential as in Germany, but it is still a useful advice. It struck me after reading chapter 8 by Akpınar that clusters can also be well analysed with the help of stakeholder theory. Ultimately, as in other types of networks, in clusters it is crucial to build trust between parties who each have their own interests.

More than three decades after Michael Porter introduced the cluster concept, enthusiasm for it has somewhat waned in policy circles. But clusters are still useful for the competitiveness and innovativeness of regions, including those that are less fortunate. However, based on the cases in their book, the editors draw the conclusion that clusters and cluster policies should not be approached too rigidly. Flexibility of cluster partners, an open mind to the outside world and more attention for non-economic dimensions (such as the role of stakeholders, relationships, and cluster management) are prerequisites for cluster success, especially in less developed regions. To be relevant in addressing regional economic challenges, the authors argue, cluster strategies should be resilient, extravert and people-oriented. I entirely agree with this plea as well as with the call, also in the book, to do more systematic research on clusters beyond Europe's innovation hotspots. Expanding

research beyond disciplinary boundaries (e.g., paying attention to sociological and anthropological aspects) can enrich the perspective, if only because the real world does not care about the artificial silos academia has created.

4. EUROPE'S FORGOTTEN REGIONS

Like the previous two books, *European Regional Policy and Development: Forgotten Regions and Spaces* is an edited volume, in this case compiled by the economists Sánchez-Carreira and Blanco-Varela (University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain) and Mourão (University of Minho, Portugal). The book's premise is that there are still large interregional disparities within Europe and that lower performing regions – often sparsely populated, peripheral areas with low per capita incomes – do not get the attention they deserve. What are the opportunities and threats of these 'Forgotten Spaces' (with capital letters!), as the editors call them? More than 20 authors have reflected on this issue, using a range of methods such as spatial econometrics, network analysis, and planning techniques. The case studies cover all of Europe: next to Spanish and Italian examples, German, Danish and Swedish cases are featured, as well as experiences gained in Estonia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary.

Of the nine chapters, I discuss three that have inspired me the most. Firstly, the chapter in which Blanco-Álvarez and González-López, using a pseudo-gravity log model and data from Spanish regions, confirm what anecdotal evidence suggests: there is a brain drain of highly skilled workers from peripheral regions to metropolitan areas with knowledge-intensive jobs. In the case of Spain, Madrid and Barcelona are the 'winners.' However, Plüschke-Althof and Sept argue in their chapter that Forgotten Spaces are not empty-handed when their talents leave. Drawing on examples from Estonia and Germany, they show that small towns can use discursive strategies, such as promoting cultural heritage or joining a town network like Cittaslow, to draw positive attention to themselves. Obviously, such actions cannot stop the brain drain, but they highlight the places among highly educated groups. The book also sees local government as having a potentially important role in developing struggling areas. This is evident, for example, in Grimbert's and Zabala-Iturriagoitia's chapter on Public Procurement for Innovation (PPI) in the Swedish city of Malmö. The redevelopment of the previously unattractive Western Harbour was a large-scale infrastructure project with positive effects. Next to improving the residential and living environment, the city's public procurement strategy led to new businesses, energy efficiency, and urban transformation. A key success factor in Malmö was that the government did not act independently, but worked closely with the local community.

Although the book is both interesting and relevant, coherence between the chapters is hard to find. For instance, chapter 4 by De Vita and three of his colleagues discusses the strategic plans of two Italian regions using textual network analysis, while Stawska examines in chapter 7 the determinants of monetary and fiscal policy in the countries of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. It is not clear what these chapters contribute to answering the main question of the book. This may also explain why the conclusions drawn by the editors in the final chapter are very general. Strategies to save Forgotten Spaces from oblivion, they argue, should consider the socio-economic and spatial context and be devised in close cooperation with local actors. In addition, the policies should be monitored and coordinated with other interventions. No one can really object to such recommendations.

5. FROM SILICON SOMEWHERE'S TO PLACES OF HOPE

In terms of their key message, the three books on territorial innovativeness I discussed are remarkably unanimous: Europe's forgotten regions can be innovative, too. But certainly in these areas, which often have to cope with lock-in phenomena and other barriers to renewal, innovation does not just happen – the stakeholders need to be stimulated, challenged, and encouraged to make it happen. Success is only possible if the specific circumstances of time and place are considered. And – not insignificantly at a time when community-led development is a popular credo – local governments can be crucial players in regional innovation systems, either as providers of funds and other incentives or as public procurement parties putting innovative projects out to tender. Besides, it is important to look beyond economic aspects – the particular spatial and social features of Europe's less fortunate regions also deserve attention to create the right conditions for territorial innovation. From actors this requires an open-mind and interdisciplinary approach, taking the complexity of the region as a starting point rather than the tunnel vision of 'Silicon Somewheres' (Hospers, 2006).

To be honest, when reading the three books, I had hoped to read more about two aspects that also seem to be important in less privileged regions. First, I see a crucial role of universities in innovation: they can act as local hubs connecting a 'thin' region to global pipelines, thus injecting external knowledge and new technologies into the system. Universities can also be facilitators in the collective learning process through which actors in a disadvantaged region go. Or, as Delbridge *et al.* (2025) found for the case of Wales: 'Universities may be able to provide a safe space in which public and private actors are able to convene, experiment and build skills and capabilities to address place-based challenges'

(p. 101). Second, I think a position as a forgotten region can also be an advantage. Economic geographer Gernot Grabher – well-known for his lock-in theory of old industrial regions – argues that marginality can also be a deliberate choice for a territory to foster creativity outside the mainstream pressures in urban centres. Referring to the Baukünstler movement in the Austrian region of Vorarlberg, he showed how self-chosen peripherality could lead to radical architectural innovation. In my view, such inspiring examples turn Europe's forgotten regions into places of hope.

REFERENCES

- BETTENCOURT, L. and LOBO, J. (2016), 'Urban scaling in Europe', *Journal of the Royal Society Interface*, 13 (6), pp. 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsif.2016.0005>
- DELBIDGE, R., HENDERSON, D. and MORGAN, K. (2025), 'Innovating innovation in the periphery: new roles for universities and public actors', [in:] ABDUL-RAHMAN, S., TUCKERMAN, L., NELLES, J. and VORLEY, T. (eds), *Innovations in Innovation Policy*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, pp. 92–105. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035322206.00013>
- GRABHER, G. (2018), 'Marginality as strategy: leveraging peripherality for creativity', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 50 (8), pp. 1785–1794. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518x18784021>
- HOSPERS, G. J. (2006), 'Silicon Somewhere? Assessing the usefulness of best practices in regional policy', *Policy Studies*, 27 (1), pp. 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442870500499934>

Gert-Jan HOSPERS  *

Radboud University (The Netherlands) and *University of Münster* (Germany)

* Gert-Jan HOSPERS, Radboud University, Department of Human Geography, Planning and Environment, Postbus 9108, 6500 HK Nijmegen, The Netherlands and University of Münster, Münster, Germany; e-mail: hospers@stad-en-regio.nl, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7569-7354>