

Recensioni - Book Review

edited by Ugo Fratesi

Theories of Local Economic Development. Rowe J. E. (ed.) (2009), London: Ashgate. 398 pages. ISBN 978-0-7546-7305-7.

“Theory does not express, translate, or serve to apply practice; it is practice” (Deleuze, 2006).

If I have extracted this sentence from the book by G. Deleuze [2006, *Foucault*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press], it is not only because James Rowe is highly enthusiastic about the theoretical insights provided by the author of *A Thousand Plateaux* and pleads for wider use of the concepts developed by the French philosopher in the analysis of local economic development. It is above all because the conception of regional or local economic development supported by Rowe and a large part of the contributors to the book is based upon a distinctive conception of this science. Rowe does not countenance any kind of separation between theories, on the one hand, and applied research or applications on the other. He is rather reluctant to highlight theories based on previous analytical traditions which will later be tested on applied data. But he is likewise truly sceptical about the capacity of local developers

to make decisions or to launch policies without the help of constant reasoning on the forms and dynamics of development paths. For Rowe, the gap between theory and practice has no meaning at all in economic development, and the separation between practitioners' experiences and theoretical elaborations related to academic works is a view of the mind. Fortunately, Rowe shares both experiences and is able to state his philosophical choice in very simple terms. He also has the talent of attracting very good scholars. Although only some of the contributors to this book fully agree with Rowe's statements, the collection of papers makes a fascinating contribution to the analysis of local, regional and territorial development.

The contributions written by Rowe himself (no less than three papers) are mainly based on two strong ideas:

Economic development is a complex process based on the entangled actions of entrepreneurs, communities, teachers, academic scholars, and (I add) local or global policies. It cannot be put in the hands of only one of these professionals, because practice and theory should not be separated. There cannot be development practices without a theory to explain how they have to be

practised, nor can there be a purely descriptive and prescriptive theory.

For these reasons, economic development requires attention of a distinctive type. Traditional development theories have usually failed when applied to this domain, because it requires an interdisciplinary approach aimed at contributing to society's practical rationality, not to developing a predictive theory.

Rowe claims that the Deleuze and Guattari approach has all the necessary advantages to elaborate a science in action. This is because it is not framed in practice or academic theory but conceives thinking as a way to both experiment and problematise. Local economic development, as an emerging discipline, requires an overarching meta-theory, or, in other words, a concrete practical rationality. This theory should be "pragmatic, understandable, flexible and adaptable in order to respond to an ever changing mix of challenges that constitutes the practice of local economic development" (Rowe, p. 314). The many concepts of the Deleuzian apparatus should be mobilised in order to assess the various dimensions of local economic development. Metaphorical terms like 'rhizomes', 'territorialisation', 'deterritorialisation', 'duration', or 'plateaus' could be used as key indicators for the development of an economic development programme.

Although this work is still in process, various papers provided by distinguished scholars make major contributions to the understanding of the various facets of local or territorial economic development. Even if one would have been happy to find more European contributors (books by Capello, Camagni or Rodriguez-Pose are not cited, as far

as read correctly), the range of competencies is immense and the fields covered yield a good idea of current studies in the field of economic development.

I cannot cite or review all the papers (16) included in this important book, but some of them drive major lines in the direction indicated by Rowe. For example, in the second part of the book, Miller's contribution on theory and practice in economic development, although brief, emphasises the different types of local policies based on theoretical insights, whether these are grounded on public or private sector models. It reveals the importance of models like location theory, or more recently the Porterian or Floridan paradigms, in the setting of local policies, and their influence upon the beliefs and behaviour of local policymakers. Beer, in a paper entitled "The theory and practice of developing locally", indicates in the same spirit how local policies initiated by local governments or communities are based upon the popular ideas established by Porter and Florida in the past twenty years. The examples of the cities of Winnipeg, Sheffield or San Diego reveal that their economic development programs, launched by consultancies or local agencies, have had to take current research in the field into account, but that in the end they have been faced with different contexts: the author concludes that not all local growth strategies work in all circumstances, whether they are conventional or more up to date.

The third part of the book is devoted to the presentation of several theoretical concepts in the broad field of local development. The paper by Mc Cann on location theory is excellent (not a surprise) and in a few pages provides a bril-

liant overview of this field of research. I have particularly appreciated the extension to industrial clusters analysis and the reading in terms of transaction costs analysis. Although I do not fully agree with the presentation of social networks, I found it a good idea to relate this type of approach to the more traditional point of view of location theory. This point is also assessed in the good contributions by Perry and Luger, who extend Porter's analysis on global competitiveness with applied examples. But my favourite paper is the one by Stimson and Stough. Though largely based on their seminal Manual on Regional Economic Development [Stimson R. J., Stough R., Roberts B. H. (2006), *Regional Economic Development. Analysis and Planning Strategy*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag], this article is the perfect example of an academic study based on constant attention to the work of policymakers. Stimson and Stough cover a broad range of analyses and local policies, from the Keynesian to the New Growth Theory, with an expert capacity to understand the very nature of local development processes and their intrinsic complexity. The small model that they propose furnishes excellent insight into the fundamental elements of a region's economic development: in my opinion it opens the way to theoretical/practical research at the regional level in very practical terms. Science is in action at this moment. The article by Dalziel, Saunders and Kaye-Blake, as well as the one by Goldstein, addresses the important topic of the role played by research and innovation in the process of territorial and regional development. The main idea is to determine how to create a competitive advantage; and R&D could be the engine of this

process. Reference is made to the theories of the so-called triple helix, which can be interpreted as an illustration of Rowe's expectations about practices-theory-related, with an emphasis on the collaborative processes of regional development involving university, industry and government partners. If these all work together, the gain could be crucial in terms of development, either in the creation of advanced knowledge or in the dissemination of knowledge externalities through different channels: spillovers to regional enterprises; production of skilled graduates, and interactions with the staffs of local government, communities or firms. However, one should be careful about the supposed "quasi automatic" effects of such relations. As stated by Blair and Carroll, large part of regional or territorial development is still linked with the composition and the structure of local social capital: this is a core resource, and it is not easily reducible to the setting of new policies of attraction or to the creation of new places for investors or for rich bohemian nomads. Social capital also concerns the embeddedness of traditional links and the ability of people to interact or to exchange and manage knowledge and skills, or to trust each other.

A recent empirical study by Donegan *et al.*, [Donegan M., Drucker J., Goldstein H., Lowe N., Malizia E. (2008), Which Indicators Explain Metropolitan Economic Performance Best?. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 74, 2: 180-195] reveals the relatively low explanatory power of various commonly identified factors of local development (traditional factors, human capital, Porter diamond, Florida

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indicators) on the level of development of different cities. In a sense, this is good news. It indicates that there is still a great deal of work to be done, and that the way is open for future research in the field. This book by Rowe is a valu-

able companion for every scholar concerned to follow the paths of territorial and regional development.

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