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Regional Transformation Processes in the Western Balkan Countries

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Book Reviews

Edited by PÄIVI OINAS

Regional Transformation Processes in the Western Balkan Countries, GYULA HORVÁTH and ZOLTÁN HAJDÚ (Eds), Centre for Regional Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Pécs (2011). 640 pp. (hbk). ISBN 978 963 9899 37 7.

This edited volume is the outcome of a joint project between the Centre for Regional Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and an Italian centre for local development: the OECD LEED Trento Centre.¹ It has an ambitious goal: to provide a comprehensive analysis of the spatial transformations of the ‘Western Balkan Countries’ – a new geographical label, shorthand for the countries emerging from the collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s plus Albania. This term is now widely used by academics, the press and some state officials because – with the exception of Slovenia – these are the only countries of South Eastern Europe that did not become part of the European Union following the enlargements of 2004 and 2007.

Besides representing a hole in the map of the European Union, differences among the Western Balkan countries overwhelm similarities. Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Kosovo emerged from the collapse of Yugoslavia. All except Macedonia were torn by wars in the 1990s; Albania had one of the most isolationist communist regimes in the world until the 1980s. By 2011, all these countries have some form of association with the European Union, but their perspectives and timing for full membership vary. In order to address the diversity of economies, political structures and societies in the region, this book includes the contributions of twenty-two academics, policy analysts and consultants. It is divided in five somewhat unevenly divided parts corresponding to the most important areas in which economies and societies have changed.

Part 1, ‘Effects of the Change of Regime’, discusses the broad transformations of the regions due to post-socialist transformation, Yugoslav wars and processes of accession of the European Union. The strength of this section is that it analyses state-building processes and geopolitical issues contextualizing recent events through a long-term historical perspective. I found the map on page 47 particularly fascinating: it depicts the stability of national borders in Europe, showing for how long different borderlines have remained stable, and thus illustrates the messiness of the Eastern part of

the continent. Part 2, ‘Demographic Processes and Labour Force’, discusses changing ethnic patterns following displacement during the wars in the 1990s, the ageing of the population, migration and employment patterns. The articles are rich in data and maps, and contextualize the specific conditions of the Western Balkans comparing them with European Union-wide trends. Part 3, ‘Environment and Settlement Network’, comprises chapters outlining the physical geography of the region, and the functions of cities in a long-term historical perspective. Part 4, ‘Political System, Public Services’, analyses governments and social exclusion, providing an insightful discussion of how socialism, post-socialism and European Union integration have dramatically reshaped the structures of sub-national administrations in the area. Part 5, ‘Economy’, analyses economic transition from multiple perspectives, ranging from industry, agriculture and banking to a discussion of economic crisis and entrepreneurship and local development.

The individual chapters fit closely with the themes of each part, and they are organized in a similar fashion: they first provide an overview of general trends in the region, and then most of them perform a country-by-country analysis; thus, the editors were successful in producing a coherent work. However, the quality of the individual contributions is highly uneven. Some of the contributions are merely organized collections of facts, which neither engage theoretical debates, nor provide sophisticated quantitative analyses. Some papers badly need English language editing. Others are much better written, and they provide relevant contributions to their respective literatures.

Among the – in my view – insightful and well-written contributions, Roberto Chizzali’s ‘Demographic transition’ compares demographic data (population pyramids, demographic transition, age pyramids, age-dependency ratios, fertility rates) of the region as a whole and of each country with the European Union averages. In doing so, it shows that, notwithstanding the wars, the lower levels of industrialization and regional diversity, the Western Balkans follow European trends. Elisa Campestrin and Emma Clarence’s ‘Employment and labour markets’ includes a detailed discussion of the consequences of the financial crisis on labour. Unexpected because of the relative isolation of the local financial markets, the crisis hit the area heavily because of the

reliance on foreign direct investments (FDIs) and remittances. Gábor Lux's 'The disintegration and reorganisation of industry in the Western Balkans' sheds further light on the economic conditions of the region, characterized by profound inequalities among countries and subregions, lack of political and financial capital to steer comprehensive reforms, deindustrialization and tertiarization. Zoltán Gál's 'The banking sector of the Western Balkans' further analyses the consequences of the crisis in the banking sector, highlighting the heavy reliance on FDIs, which will not likely increase for several years. However, the banking sector as a whole has experienced growth, and also improvements in stability. Nevertheless, systemic risk is still high because of household debts financed by foreign currency loans.

Overall, the book engages debates on economic transition and post-socialism, but misses the opportunity of addressing theoretical issues on Europeanization, Balkanism, Orientalism and geopolitics. For example, there is no reference to the work of BALIBAR (2004) on transnationalism and Europe, of TODOROVA (1997) on the construction of the Balkans, or of WOLFF's (1994) and NEUMANN's (1999) work on the othering of Eastern Europe. This book also misses an explicit engagement with critical geopolitics, for example with the work of Gerald Toal and Carl Dahlman (TOAL and LUKE, 1994; DAHLMAN and TOAL, 2005).

In conclusion, the book only partially meets its goal, because its engagement with theory is often too thin, and because the quality of contributions is uneven. However, some of the papers are rich in data and insights, and are valuable readings for graduate students approaching the region for the first time, as well as for more seasoned geographers, sociologists and political scientists interested in post-socialist transformation and Europeanization.

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NOTE

1. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED).

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- Key Concepts in Economic Geography**, YUKO AOYAMA, JAMES T. MURPHY and SUSAN HANSON, Sage, London (2011). viii + 278 pp. £21.99 (pbk). ISBN 978 1 84787 895 3.

Key Concepts in Economic Geography provides a fundamental overview of a series of important concepts and major themes in contemporary economic geography. The book is directed against upper-level undergraduate and postgraduate students. It sets out to present the historical roots and contemporary applications of key concepts needed to understand economic change, regional growth, globalization, and the location dynamics of firms and industries. After a short Introduction follow six main chapters. Chapter 1 starts out the tour de force by presenting the key agents in economic geography; labour, firms and the state. Chapter 2 examines key drivers of economic change – or rather growth; innovation, entrepreneurship and accessibility. Chapter 3 is concerned with industries and regions in economic change, and outlines industrial location, industrial clusters, regional disparity and post-Fordism. Chapter 4 on global economic geographies looks at core-periphery models, globalization, the circuits of capital in a Marxist perspective, and David Harvey's spatial fix and global value chains. Chapter 5 examines the socio-cultural context of economic change including a variety of subjects such as the cultural turn and cultural and creative industries, gender, institutions, embeddedness and networks; while the final chapter examines emerging themes in economic geography including the knowledge economy, financialization, consumption and sustainable development.

The book provides a fine overview of the discipline of economic geography and its dominant contemporary themes and concepts. However, it does appear a bit cluttered when read from cover to cover. For instance, the inclusion of the circuits of capital in Chapter 4 does not have a direct logic to it. The section could be a part of any of the first chapters of the book. Likewise, the chapter on drivers of economic change has very little reference to technology and technological change and to knowledge and knowledge production. Rather, focus is on innovation (which is sensible), entrepreneurship and accessibility. These are all important aspects of

economic change, but so are technological development/progress and knowledge production. Moreover, there is nothing you can actually take hold of reading the individual chapters and sections. There is a lack of meta-communication in the book and the reader is left with little understanding of various positions in economic geography and of how the concepts and their change is read into larger economic transformations (implicitly the book does refer to various positions and if you know your economic geography you can decode them).

Therefore, I would have appreciated a better framing of economic geography as a field and discipline and a better framing of the individual chapters in the book. How has the field developed since the 1960s and how is that development related to the real-world changes in the economy? The book might have benefitted from the inclusion of something more coherent about the main positions in economic geography, for instance in the Introduction; I missed passages on the quantitative revolution and spatial analysis, the rise of the Marxist and political economy, and the more recent institutional and cultural turns. Further, a framing with an update on the transformation of the economy in the past decades might have given the reader a better understanding of the individual sections of the book. For instance, the section on industrial location would have benefitted from insight into the development of the discipline putting von Thünen and Weber in their rightful places; and the section on post-Fordism would have gained from a better review of the real-world economic changes in the 1970s and 1980s.

Hence, on the one hand the book gives a basic introduction to economic geography and familiarizes the

reader with a broad range of concepts and themes; however, on the other hand the book only touches lightly on many central concepts such as localization and urbanization economies. Further, specialist knowledge in economic geography is required to grasp the real depth of the individual chapters and sections as well as the history of the concepts, theoretical positions and themes.

That said, the book offers an excellent updated summing up for upper undergraduates and, importantly, supported by additional literature it may serve as a basic textbook in a course on economic geography provided the students have acquired some fundamental knowledge of economic geography including its history and central positions. Thus, it should not serve as an introductory textbook to the field, but it can give students with an interest in economic geography an overview of the heterogeneity of the discipline and of the complexity of the (uneven) economic geographies of the world. The references for each chapter and section together with suggested further readings are very helpful tools, although few minor mistakes have slipped into the references. Hence, the book provides a very good base for students to engage in their bachelor's or even master's theses on subjects in economic geography whether they want to examine cultural industries, global value chains or the knowledge economy.

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