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## Rethinking the European exception

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Kevin Cox's book is original in two significant ways. First because it delivers a salutary return to Marxist "purity" in the reading of the processes of production of the urban fabric. Kevin Cox practices a nice "vintage" Marxism. And this is something he also celebrates in his blog "[Unfashionable geographies](#)". Here, there is no risky synthesis between structuralist and constructivist perspectives, as apparently promised in the "critical urban studies" which wants to hold everything in one encompassing theoretical system. As a faithful disciple of David Harvey and his "historical and geographical materialism" (xiv), Cox shifts the gaze from what obsessed classical Marxists - capitalist production- towards how the product is consumed through investment in land and buildings. He is convinced, like Harvey, that the modalities of investment of the surplus in space, and the logics of rent, overaccumulation that they arouse are an essential part of the capitalist system, at the origin of most of the crises that it goes through on a regular basis (Harvey, 2011). We forget all too often the heuristic character of the classical -"unfashionable"- Marxist analyses of the production processes of the urban fabric and this book offers a salutary synthesis of what this tradition can bring.

The second originality of the book is that it brings a strong and welcome challenge to the theories of convergence that today dominate the field of international "urban studies", especially the theses on the neoliberalisation of urban policies (for a critical reading, see Pinson & Morel *Journal*, 2017). On this point, Kevin Cox's thesis is quite simple. For him, what he calls "urban and regional development" covers a set of practices that take very various forms on different sides of the Atlantic. In the US, this is expressed in a series of activities marked by their "bottom up" character, carried by coalitions of local actors in which rent interests dominate. In Western Europe, the designation and management of spaces that require forms of urbanization and equipment are, according to Cox, a set of activities whose foundations are discussed at national level and which are still largely coordinated by the State and its various branches. This clarification is beneficial because it comes from the very same theoretical Marxist galaxy that has generated the theories on neoliberalisation and policy mobilities in vogue today (McCann & Ward, 2011). However, these theories spend their time explaining that institutions are important and produce variety while explaining that these varieties are swept by the high winds of neoliberalism. Kevin Cox analyzes as a Marxist but, while not

displaying it, takes the institutions (the public policies, the path dependence, the mobilizations and the political organizations, etc.) seriously until the end. That clarification was much needed.

However, Kevin Cox's book has, as we say in French, "the flaws of his qualities". I formulate them in the form of jokes and in a friendly spirit, on the background of great respect for this work. To my taste, Kevin's approach is too Marxist, too English, and too American!

Too Marxist because he tends to reduce the stakes and practices of urban and regional development to activities aimed at generating and capturing land value. In his view, rent capture is the obsession not only of capitalists and local governments but also homeowners. The book does not give any role to those capitalists who extract a benefit on other bases than the soil and who nevertheless may have an interest in development policies because territory is a source of positive externalities for them. Kevin Cox excludes from his analysis local economic development policies that have a more distant relationship with the real estate issue: policies of economic animation, innovation, training, territorial promotion or clusters (Galimberti, 2013). By recognizing the variety of relationships that capitalists can have with territory, Cox could have given more strength to his thesis of US exceptionalism. Indeed, we can hypothesize that in European cities, property development interests are no longer the only capitalists able to establish lasting relationships with urban governments, which have an impact on the content of development policies. There are still industrial capitalists whose activities are dependent on externalities provided by the territory (infrastructure, training institutions but also local networks and know how). This type of capitalists can have an interest in developing durable relationships with local government to maintain and develop these externalities, that colleagues have coined "local collective competition goods" (Crouch et al., 2001). Beyond industrialists, the same is probably true for other sectors such as finance or the digital economy. In effect, Cox even acknowledges this when he highlights the evolution of European cities' development policies from the attraction of inward investment to the activation of clusters, something that seems less obvious in the United States.

Too English, because Kevin Cox seems to grant no political credit to territorial mobilization. For him, conflicts around urban and regional development actually refer to class conflicts. However, when they are confined to local spaces, these conflicts take on a parochial, territory versus territory, form. For Cox, only national space can politicize these issues. This politicization is the condition for the elaboration of policies to regulate territorial inequalities that only the central state can take charge of. Territorial mobilizations that question the domination of one territory over another are thus

definitively ranked on the side of "parochialism". The territory is necessarily the hiding place of the class struggle, a diversion. This leads him to neglect the fact that, sometimes, the very construction of centralized states, concentrating the functions of production, consumption and management in the capitals, has generated glaring situations of unequal development and dependence of peripheral regions. Territorial mobilizations and urban and regional development policies are also attempts to recover an ability to organize development and get out of dependence. As a native Englishman who has experienced London's dominance of the rest of the country, Cox should be aware of this issue. Nevertheless, England is also that country that was unified very early by the Norman conquest and where the center-periphery relations do not have the confrontational character that they have in Southern Europe (Page and Goldsmith, 1987). England is the country where the local government has been confined to the production of welfare and has no vocation to defend and represent local societies absorbed by a center (see the dichotomy developed by B. Smith distinguishing local government systems that value "efficiency" and other that value "community", Smith, 1985). However, and funnily enough, the Scottish referendum and the Brexit vote have demonstrated that even in the UK, one of the European countries where the center-periphery cleavage has always been considered less salient, the uneven development promoted by the central State has given rise to new forms of territorial mobilization. We can see here the limit of a comparative approach that embraces Europe as a relatively uniform ensemble.

Finally, native English, Cox has probably also become, in the long run, too American. In this context, the book underestimates the extent of the transformations that have taken place in urban and regional development policies and in relations between central states, cities and regions in Europe for 30 years. If we can easily follow him when he insists on the maintenance of an American exceptionalism, we can regret that he does so by means of a "frozen" vision and sometimes suffused with nostalgia of Europe. In particular, it tends to underestimate the rise of metropolises and regions (Le Galès, 2002, Pinson, 2009). This rise took place against the backdrop of the challenge of the regional policies, conceived by central governments and intended to counteract uneven development, which Cox identifies as being at the very heart of the "European model", but which actually had many perverse effects. These policies have certainly taken some peripheral regions out of the margins and given a role to secondary cities. However, they have also often had the effect of strengthening the directional capacities of capital cities, confining the peripheries to lower-level economic functions and reinforcing their dependence (Trigilia, 1992). In France and elsewhere in Europe, the philosophy of these policies could be summed up in the famous formula coined by Olivier Guichard, first boss of the DATAR (the French agency for regional development created in

1963) who once said "what centralization has done, only centralization can undo". Current urban and regional entrepreneurialism is the outcome of movements that questioned this very approach from the 1970s on and gave way to the decentralization and federalization reforms that have stirred Western Europe. It is partly this challenge that has made mayors emerge and local development policies increasingly ambitious. This evolution has certainly had the effect of unleashing a territorial competition which is beginning to see the onset of deleterious effects, but it has also had the effect of empowering local elected officials and economic elites and strengthening peripheral regions. And as Cox shows, it did not put an end to the European concern for territorial cohesion.

To sum up, Cox's Marxist classicism is a great weapon to free urban scholars from one of the new orthodoxies that affect the urban studies' community: the dominance of convergence theories granting a shallow attention to places, contexts, processes and institutions. However, he is caught in another trap along with many radical and critical urbanists. He considers territorial mobilizations for development that take the shape of urban and regional policies necessarily to be the outcomes of a kind of "false consciousness" in which actors are trapped. So doing, he is in a way very much in line with the new *doxa* in urban studies that tend to give insufficient credit to public policies and the historicity of relations between levels of government.

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