

Call for papers for a special issue of *Growth and Change: A Journal of Urban and Regional Policy* – Publication in December 2019

Taking the systems approaches out of their comfort zones: perspectives from under explored contexts

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Systemic approaches to economic development have increasingly become popular in the spheres of economic geography, regional science, innovation and entrepreneurship studies and strategy. National, Regional and Local Innovation Systems (Cooke, 1998; Lundvall, 2007), Entrepreneurial (Spigel, 2017; Stam, 2015) and Innovation Ecosystems (Adner and Kapoor, 2010) as well as Business (Moore, 1993) and Knowledge Ecosystems are all examples of concepts that have proven popular as both academic and policy frameworks when studying and practicing local and regional economic development. Containing elements of previous concepts such as industrial districts (Marshall, 1920) or clusters (Porter, 1998), learning regions as well as the industrial milieu (Camagni, 1995), the (eco)system perspective is mainly based on the analogy to natural ecosystems (Colombo et al., 2017; Audretsch et al., 2018). As such, it reflects the assumption that economic agents interact among each other and with their environment explaining differential economic output and outcome (Acs et al., 2017).

Recent contributions and special issues have vastly expanded the body of work examining systemic perspectives, addressing the common critique of being undertheorized concepts. And while much has been achieved in this respect, it remains largely unclear to what extent these approaches – developed and tested predominantly in highly developed contexts – can be transplanted into other, less favoured settings. Approaching the systems-perspective as a top-down approach allows (and requests) a governing Chandlerian “visible” hand (Colombo et al., 2017). With aggregate (regional) performance lying at the heart of public policy, it is hardly surprising that much of the (eco)system research focuses on high-growth, highly innovative high-tech industries, on unicorns (Acs) or blockbusters (Mason and Brown, 2014). However, such an approach – overlooking underdeveloped regions, non-high tech industries or other less favoured contexts – is inherently dangerous for various reasons when applying it as a policy framework.

On the one hand side, focusing on highly developed in the settings of the Global North is too narrow. Not only has research shown that context such as regional culture, history and institutions matter for the development of a region (e.g. Saxenian, 1994); thus limiting insights into the complex causal and systemic relations of what fosters entrepreneurship and innovation in the Global South with a strikingly distinct context. Additionally, focusing on highly successful regions with a long history of industrial development limits insights into what triggers the emergence of entrepreneurship and or innovation in less favourable settings, calling for more work in regions with lagging preconditions (Mack and Mayer, 2016). Only through such work will policy makers be able to answer question in which way underperforming, non-innovative industries or even destructive entrepreneurship can be led towards a road of progress. On the other hand, even in highly developed contexts, the focus on

high-growth high-tech industries and ventures limits our understanding of what enables the emergence and the sustainable growth of eco(systems). Even unicorns or blockbusters – such as Amazon – are intrinsically connected to other types of ventures as they depend on their participation in order to achieve the scale necessary for their high growth (Neumayer et al., 2018). Thus, focusing

narrowly on those unicorns overlooks the role played by those “second-tier” businesses in the emergence and the sustainability of (eco)systems. At the same time, those high-growth ventures are mostly founded and managed by white males (Neymeyer et al., 2018), excluding the participation of certain demographic groups from the participation in support networks (Fairlie, 2007; Gatewood et al., 2009). This, however, merits special consideration when not only economic development but also local welfare as well as a balanced and sustainable growth are the aim of public policy.

Whilst efforts have been made to apply and implement systems perspectives in developing and less-favoured settings (e.g. Tsvetkova et al., 2017; Lundvall et al., 2011; Sheriff and Muffato, 2015; Neymeyer et al., 2018) giving way for less “copy and paste” and more place-based approaches, this work is still in a minority with the focus remaining on exceptionally performing urban economies in the global North, most often with a high-growth or high-tech focus. We therefore posit that these rapidly expanding and popular systemic concepts require more testing and application in a variety of regional and sectoral contexts. In this vein, we call for contributions to a special issue broadening the scope of systemic perspectives, and rigorously testing their applicability and tenability in a wider range of contexts, including but not limited to:

- the Global South,
- rural and peripheral settings,
- non high-tech industrial sectors,
- agrarian and cultural sector,
- under-performing and lagging economies
- informal economies

This special issue will move the discourse on innovation and entrepreneurial (eco)systems past its current limits. We are interested in gaining and sharing more knowledge about local policy and other initiatives aimed at fostering sustainable and balanced growth, promoting local welfare and other desirable outcomes. We, in particular, hope to add context to the existing plentiful quantitative studies within the systems approach to local and regional development. We are interested in contributions that take the (eco)systems approach out of its leading urban region (usually in North America or Europe) heartland, and also provide some industrial or economic contexts outside of the usual suspects of high tech industries such as ICT or biotech. We hope to “democratize” and critique the theory by testing its applicability in a wide range of sectors and geographical locations. We believe there is a strong need within economic geography and entrepreneurship fields to think more about the contextual significance when examining the current trendy concepts and buzzwords, because these are often developed from a narrow range of case studies in the Global North.

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