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The Role of Culture in the Economic Development of Old Industrial Regions

Regionen in Europa / European Regions

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Regionen in Europa/ European Regions

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INTRODUCTION: CULTURE, ECONOMY AND OLD INDUSTRIAL REGIONS

Paul Benneworth and Gert-Jan Hospers*

Inspired by the work of Richard Florida, an American professor who meanwhile has acquired the status of a guru, cultural assets such as theatres, museums and festivals are increasingly seen as significant drivers of regional and urban economic development. From this viewpoint, the cultural climate of an area is considered as an important location factor for creative knowledge workers ('the creative class') who are alleged to place high demands on their work and living environment. In particular old industrial regions in North-America and Europe – looking for new paths of development after severe industrial decline over the last decades – have been seduced by the promises of Florida's theory.

In this book, scholars coming from all over Europe discuss the extent to which culture can contribute to the economic development of old industrial regions. The twelve chapters are all revised versions of papers presented at the third meeting of the RSA working group on Old Industrial Knowledges organized at the University of Twente in the Netherlands (29th-31st January 2007). Due to unforeseen circumstances the publication of the papers in the book took a lot of time, for which the editors do apologize. Fortunately, the themes addressed have lost nothing of their relevance and topicality yet. To the contrary: nearly every day we can read about public investments in high-brow culture with the aim of spurring growth in mature local economies.

The first three chapters have a theoretical flavour and explore general relationships between culture and the economy of old industrial regions. John Harrison analyses the post-industrial trajectory of England's North West and the choice for Liverpool as the European Capital of Culture 2008. With the help of Dutch examples Martin van den Toorn makes clear how landscape design can contribute to contemporary culture and can give regions a new identity. In turn, Robert Kloosterman and Merijn van der Werff examine the question whether culture can be considered as a local anchor in a world of flows.

The next three chapters are concerned with the regenerating role of culture in old industrial economies. Based on a case study of a small industrial city in Northern Sweden Ulf Wiberg demonstrates that successful urban design is a complex interplay of physical, social, economic and cultural forces at the local level. Jon Swords focuses on Northumbria's countryside and argues that there is

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potential for cultural heritage in regenerating such rural areas. Finally, Rüdiger Hamm shows how a premium league soccer club in Germany (as an example of 'low culture') can have positive effects on the regional economy.

In the three chapters that follow the concept of 'creative cities' is evaluated. Drawing on evidence from Newcastle Roberta Comunian challenges Florida's creative class theory and pleas for more attention for the social networks that drive local economies. Mariangela Lavanga tells the story of how the Finnish city of Tampere developed from a 'Manchester of the North' towards a cultural city. Referring to the Dutch city of Arnhem Janneke van den Oever finally looks for the appropriate role of government in supporting the creative city.

The last chapters of the book are devoted to the contribution of cultural facilities to revitalization in Eastern Europe. Roman Sebastyanski examines the role of art in the Gdansk shipyard regeneration project. Grzegorz Micek reports on the Polish IT industries, where education and embeddedness turn out to be more important than cluster development. Alice May ends the tour through Europe in Ivanovo ('the Russian Manchester'), exploring why local economists did not apply the post-industrial model of economic development based on service and cultural industries after the industrial collapse of the region.

The common thread of this volume is that cultural assets can indeed play a role in stimulating the economy of old industrial regions. It is, however, not so much the direct number of jobs created by cultural facilities that counts. Investments in culture seem to work indirectly, in that they act as a booster of regional image. Another finding of the book is that there is more than high-brow culture when talking about culture-led development. Especially in old industrial regions the role of popular and low culture should not be underestimated. All in all, the chapters make clear that old industrial areas should not invest in culture per se, but tune these investments to the particularities of time of space.

In this edited volume scholars coming from all over Europe discuss the extent to which high- and low-culture can contribute to the economic development of Europe's old industrial regions. Including case studies from areas in the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Poland and Russia, the book demonstrates that culture can play a role in regenerating old industrial regions, but rather as an image booster than as a job machine.

Paul Benneworth is senior research fellow at Newcastle University. Gert-Jan Hospers teaches economic geography at the University of Twente and the Radboud University Nijmegen.

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