

13

The road ahead: advancing our research agenda for small and medium-sized towns in a world of uneven development

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An invitation

We conclude this book with an invitation to you, the reader, to engage in further research about small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs). In the present chapter, we outline a road ahead for scholarly work in this field. We personally think that the points we present are worthwhile to be considered, but we also encourage you to revise them with your own ideas about future research. As a matter of fact, research on SMSTs has come a long way and we are convinced that SMSTs will stay in focus and that we can leverage the momentum that has been built up over the past years. We follow the call by Ocejo et al. (2020) “to step back from uncritical acceptance of large size as the arbiter of urbanity” (p. 3).

Robinson (2006) also insists on the need to put the “ordinary cities,” where many people live and work, at the center of the academic debate and to extrapolate theoretical insights from all types of cities and not only from global or creative ones. The research agendas presented in this book propose to consider SMSTs as ordinary cities and we ought to theorize from the insights we gain from the study of smaller urban places.

The road ahead

Keep on going

We would like to start the road ahead by encouraging scholars to keep on going and to continue their research on SMSTs. This suggestion is not trivial because the lure to turn the attention to the exceptional cases such as global or world cities or the most innovative or economically successful cities is quite strong. Speaking from our own experience, we know that it is often difficult and challenging to defend one's research focus on SMSTs. Some colleagues or reviewers seem to get bored by such a focus as they would probably prefer to hear and read interesting, perhaps even exceptional, stories. Yet, if we can withstand the pressure to turn to the exceptional, and if we keep on going and continue to focus on SMSTs, we will be able to deepen and develop a more coherent set of theories. This way, we will be able to examine more systematically the experiences and the cases of smaller urban places.

Going beyond size

One of the most important insights this book offers is the notion that we need to go beyond population size when studying SMSTs. SMSTs are not merely the smaller version of large cities. In fact, depending on their context, position and networks, SMSTs can develop dynamics that are not expected given their size. As cities – both large and small – are more and more connected within their functional region, but also through national and international networks, the need to examine the benefits and drawbacks of their position within the urban system becomes obvious. Evert Meijers and Martijn Burger apply the concepts of “borrowed size” and “agglomeration shadow” to SMSTs (Chapter 3) and provide us with a framework that goes beyond size. A number of chapters in this book criticize the urban bias and implicit judgment of SMSTs of whether or not they fit frameworks developed in the context of large cities (see for example Chapter 9 by Koen Saleminck). It is therefore necessary to analyze, once more, the dynamics of small and medium-sized cities not only in terms of opposition, dependence or marginality. This implies a relational approach and a multipolar and interdependent development perspective regarding large cities, which leads to the enhancement of distinctive local resources and new “alliances.”

Towards an actor-oriented approach

In addition to positioning, this book points to the important role organizations, actors and institutions play in SMSTs. We need to recognize that their

quality and capabilities do matter beyond their mere presence, absence or simply their quantity. We challenge scholars to focus on the ways in which actors in SMSTs forge ahead and how they use their unique skills, capabilities and connections in doing so (as outlined by Arnault Morisson in Chapter 12). Also, a focus on a diverse range of policies and how policies are designed, implemented and what kind of impact they have will be important in such an actor-oriented approach (as David Kaufmann and Stefan Wittwer suggest in Chapter 11). There also needs to be a focus on why actors, organizations and institutions do not help and why they hinder the development of towns. Combining a perspective on positioning with an actor-oriented approach will allow us to explain the development trajectories of SMSTs. Their ability to adapt to changes and to promote socio-economic development are linked to individual actors, but especially to the system of interactions they manage to build and to their capacity to align different interests and agendas. In this direction, the small size can favor the construction of local networks, which can then function in a collective manner and contribute to the definition of a shared urban vision.

New forms of urbanity

Working on SMSTs allows us to uncover a diverse range of urban experiences and responses to challenges. A focus on SMSTs provides an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of diverse modes of urbanity. We will then be able to examine whether the processes that we observe in SMSTs are similar or different to those in large cities. Some developments might be surprisingly similar (e.g. when we think of economic dynamics), while others may deviate and be quite different (e.g. when it comes to identities). In the scientific literature, the provincialism of SMSTs is often emphasized as opposed to the socio-economic dynamism and cultural openness of large cities. In reality, as Garrett-Petts (2005) points out, the definition of the urban dimension is configured as experiential and influenced by the habitus, the sense of place, the attitude of a town to build local development paths and to live cityness practices (see also Chapter 2 by Annett Steinführer). Given our call to go beyond size, to incorporate the quality and capabilities of actors and institutions and to think about SMSTs as places where urbanity plays out differently, we point towards theories and concepts that incorporate variation from the beginning and thereby avoid superimposing existing ones.

More empirical and comparative work

The chapters in this book provide a framework for studying SMSTs. There is a need for more empirical work, particularly work that compares SMSTs. Such

comparisons would need to be systematic as they would need to hold certain aspects constant (e.g. context, type of actor, local projects, etc.). We encourage more work that is sensitive to the urban bias and takes SMSTs at face value. We also think that it would be important to conduct empirical work in an inductive and deductive manner. Approaching SMSTs without pre-defined theoretical frameworks allows researchers a more impartial assessment. While theories are important, we always need to be aware of their origins and the embedded assumptions. Theories can help with interpretation, but they may be biased towards larger cities (as Heike Mayer in Chapter 6 shows for innovation and entrepreneurship). From the methodological point of view, empirical research will have to incorporate quantitative analyses on the evolution of SMSTs and their integration with other centers of urban networks, with more qualitative investigations aimed at reconstructing specific paths and identifying the characterizing factors. This means giving space to direct observations, interviews with local actors and stakeholders, analyses of the implemented policies and narrative components built around current and future projects.

Open questions

What is missing in this book? Are there topics that have not been addressed by the authors, but that need to be taken up by future research? Perhaps it is worth mentioning that we have not addressed questions related to uneven development and the role of SMSTs in fostering cohesive territorial development. As concerns are growing about uneven territorial development and the rise of “places that don’t matter” (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), we encourage further research to answer critical questions about the role of SMSTs in stabilizing or destabilizing socio-economic development. For instance, to what extent can SMSTs play a role as anchors and central places in wider regions that are subject to industrial decline and structural change? Or, alternatively, do SMSTs drain their hinterlands of economic opportunities? Furthermore, in what ways are regional inequalities affected by developments in nearby SMSTs? How are SMSTs emerging from crisis situations such as the global COVID-19 pandemic and are they able to capture positive dynamics such as digitalization and reindustrialization (as suggested by David Bole in Chapter 7)? As many national policies ascribe central place functions to SMSTs (as also illustrated in Chapter 4 by Christophe Demazière), the relevance of these kinds of questions is growing.

In addition, we have not addressed questions related to the role of identity and culture in shaping local projects and development trajectories of small towns. The urban dimension of small urban centers can guarantee the possibility of preserving their identity and characteristics – despite the presence

of fewer functions and services – and at the same time foster the emergence of bottom-up projects through the involvement of local communities (as also underlined in Chapter 5 by Michela Lazzeroni). Moreover, the revitalization of small towns and villages represents in some countries, such as Italy and Switzerland, one of the axes of post-pandemic recovery processes related to new ways of living and to spending free time. From this perspective, what actions can be designed to enhance the local identity and culture without risking closure or resistance to change and innovation? How is it possible to activate tourism development without the risk of overtourism or the commodification of some spaces intended for traditional uses and activities (thereby continuing the work developed in this book by Chiara Rabbiosi and Dimitri Ioannides in Chapter 8)? What policies can be implemented to strengthen existing local communities and integrate new residents, avoiding operation with a dominant real-estate logic? What role can technologies play in all this?

Also, given the increasing importance of grand societal challenges such as climate change, biodiversity, energy self-sufficiency, etc., we have probably not adequately addressed questions related to the ways in which SMSTs are adapting to such challenges. Are these smaller urban places nimbler, as Timothy Beatley suggests in Chapter 10, when it comes to implementing innovative and experimental measures that help address challenges related to climate adaptation, biodiversity protection, etc.? Does community cohesion help them be more flexible in addressing the challenges? Considering the ways in which policy makers and other types of actors in SMSTs address challenges gives us manifold opportunities for future research.

Lastly, our focus in this book was mostly oriented towards the industrialized world in the Global North and less on the role and function and relevant questions regarding SMSTs in the Global South. There are numerous open research questions related to the development of SMSTs in the global periphery. Given that in many countries of the Global South urban development patterns were oriented towards only a few cities, SMSTs were often overlooked and less understood.

Taking turns

We hope that this book offers interesting insights into the ways in which we can develop future research on SMSTs. As editors, we learned a lot and are inspired by the chapters presented in this book. We would like to thank the authors for contributing their insights to this agenda and for traveling along

with us on a journey to explore smaller urban places. As a reader, you may be an established scholar, an emerging researcher, a graduate student or a policy maker with an interest in SMSTs. We encourage you to continue the road ahead and to help us build novel empirical approaches, theories and concepts, but also policy practices that are suitable for the manifold realities of SMSTs.

References

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