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Place ratings, shifting neoliberalism and quality of life in communities

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Abstract

The publication of place ratings on the basis of their competitive attractiveness and quality of life has been one element of place marketing and promotion agenda associated with the onset of neoliberalism. The *Places Rated Almanac* in the US has epitomised and led the development of such guides, and after a quarter of a century appears on the basis of sales to continue to offer currency and utility. This paper explores the relevance of this particular almanac and its offsprings within the context of recent accounts of the periodisation of neoliberalism. In particular it considers the extent to which such guides have continued to have resonance through the shift from economic-focussed roll back neoliberalism to more socially-oriented roll out neoliberalism.

Key words: communities, ratings, places, neoliberalism, mobilities

Introduction

For a quarter of a century now, the *Places Rated Almanac* (PRA) has been helping Americans find their 'best' place to live. 'Best' in this context is clearly a subjective attribute that may be more accurately considered as shorthand for "most suited to individual interests". Nonetheless its comparisons have clearly resonated with businesses and policy planners as well as individuals as a means to learn about other places as well as their own. Whether the target audience was the average American family looking for a change of scenery, or more specialised groups such as economic developers or retirees in search of their place in the sun, David Savageau and his co-authors have succeeded in publishing a series of best-selling guides to hundreds of communities across North America. In fact, since their first edition was published, they have been responsible for a veritable niche industry, providing not only a relative barometer on the evolution of American communities but also stimulating many competing and complementary ratings by other commercial and academic organisations in North America and around the world.

While each guide has been controversial, as rankings inevitably are, none of the criticisms of the various PRA guides slowed the juggernaut of their commercial success. The 1981 edition (Boyer and Savageau, 1981), published by Rand McNally, was arguably the first serious attempt in the USA to popularise a statistical ranking of communities and their quality of life, and it had within 12 months been reprinted four times. Similarly the 1985 edition was reprinted three times within a year. While the later editions – the *Places Rated Almanac, Millennium Edition* (Savageau and D'Agostino, 2000) and the special edition of the *Retirement Places Rated* (Savageau, 2004) – have not sold as many copies as the original versions, they remain best

sellers, with the latest editions of PRA being published in September 2007 (Savageau, 2007).

This critical essay explores why such popularity of place ratings continues within the US, and how such ratings have morphed over the past two decades. In particular, the paper explores ways in which PRA and its offspring have reflected and reacted to the changing nature of neoliberalism and the needs of capital. It argues that the continuing relevance of the PRA is related to its capacity to appeal not only to the place competitiveness of 'roll back' neoliberalism of the 1990s but also to the new forms of 'roll out' neoliberalism which foregrounds 'social policy making' (Peck and Tickell, 2002). It does so by considering three issues, with first an exploration of the continuing resonance of ratings within the shifting context of urban politics and the 'new' political economy of cities. Second, associated with a move beyond the singularity of economic competitiveness, it explores the extent to which the basis of the rankings reflects a form neo-imperialism. Finally, the essay considers how even without substantive evidence that almanacs such as the PRA have shaped patterns of migration, there is a utility of such ratings for communities in their engagement with social and economic agendas arising from roll out neoliberalism.

The almanacs' neoliberal credentials

The PRA was a birthchild of the neoliberal era of the early 1980s. Its foundation was the growing restlessness of Americans with their current living and working locations – more than 5 million moved annually in the late 1970s – and the entrepreneurial opportunities created by the rapidly expanding data sets about local places. It capitalised on the switch from nationally and centrally driven Fordist-Keynesian policies towards more market oriented, neoliberal economic policies where movement of capital – human as well as financial – was central to economic well-being. And the almanac resonated with the notion of a 'new urban politics' (NUP) in which cities were increasingly pitied against each other in their search to tap into growth opportunities.

Such NUP was linked with new forms of urban leadership; ones which were more entrepreneurial, growth-oriented and adopting the characteristics of the private sector – risk taking, inventiveness, promotional and profit motivated (Cox and Mair, 1988, Harvey, 1989a). For those involved in these new public-private partnerships promoting urban growth, new emphasis was placed not only on exploiting the differential characteristics of cities in order to compete for private and public investment, but also on the need for clear evidence to support claims of local competitive advantage.

Alongside attempts to produce and cultivate the forms of agglomeration economies which have characterised Silicon Valley and Los Angeles (Davis, 1990) or 'Little Italy' in Europe (Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993), the formation of informational cities and networked tiers of 'global cities' (Taylor, 1995), and the capturing of hallmark events, property-led redevelopments (characterised by Baltimore's transformation, Harvey (1989b)), place rating at a national and international level became important as places openly competing in this new neoliberal and globalised world.

At least part of the success of the PRA was the synchronicity of this new political economy context with Boyer and Savageau's assessment that in the increasingly mobile United States, there was a dearth of information about places to assist relocators – and city marketeers. The PRA capitalised on the provision by US National Census Bureau of much richer geographical data, opening up possibilities

for more sophisticated analysis of living conditions below state level. Liu's (1976) pioneering study had already shown the possibilities of drawing on this locally-based data-rich environment to undertake a statistical analysis of the 'quality of living conditions in metropolitan areas' and reveal that there were strong differences across the (then) 243 standard metropolitan statistical areas (SMSAs). It was in this new research space that the PRA was located. Like Liu, they analysed not only the separate dimensions of a place's attractiveness but also derived a cumulative index of what they later termed 'quality of life'.

Although immediately subjected to criticism over its statistical base, the computational analysis and weightings, and the limited conceptual and theoretical underpinnings (Bell, 1984; Pierce, 1985; Cutter, 1985), the PRA nevertheless became itself a benchmark of place rating, and what became quality of life rankings of places. Such ratings became fashionable as part of the armoury of tools available to growth coalitions and city development authorities/agencies in their attempt to capture the diversity of economic capital available (Harvey, 1989a). In particular, rankings were utilised in the promotion of places; 'selling the city' as a product (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990). Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, such place promotion on the basis of relative performance in league tables was a common component of those charged with economic development (Amin and Thrift, 2002). Places rated highly – even if only on a selective set of features – used these in justification of their attractiveness. Those at the other 'end' of the table deployed rankings as justification for investment from the state to raise them to a more level playing field in the game of capturing global capital.

Such global reach in turn led to a rash of international place ratings, emulating in part the methods and approaches of more national based studies in the US (including PRA), and in the UK (Rogerson et al, 1989; Moneywise Magazine, 1991). Some took on a regional perspective, with Healey & Baker (2000) for example producing annually a ranking of major European cities, whilst other such as the single Population Crisis Committee (1990) study or the more regular Mercer Human Resource Consulting survey rated a set of global cities. Each informed potential movers of the relative benefits (and pitfalls) of locations.

Moving beyond economic competitiveness

The relative futility of such overt and direct attempts to lever global capital as a 'zero sum game' has increasingly been recognised over the past decade. The sporadic successes of attracting capital and the apparent acceleration of mobility of capital, employment, and public investment have challenged this aspect of neoliberal entrepreneurialism (Cochrane et al., 1996). Instead neoliberal processes of economic management have shifted to areas concerned with intervention in, and control over, more social issues (Brenner and Theodore, 2002).

This is not the place to explore such periodisation of neoliberalism fully (see Lerner, 2000; Jessop, 2003; McNeill, 2005, and Craig and Porter, 2006) for example). Recent accounts, drawing especially on regulationist perspectives, have argued for greater appreciation of the important differences within the neoliberal project, and differences arising from local variation and mutation (Lerner and Craig, 2005). Under this neoliberalisation thesis, there have been shifts in the emphasis in the nature and form of regulation, institutionalisation, and central focus of neoliberal forms of governance. In particular, Peck and Tickell's (2002) proposed three-stage periodisation is of utility here, drawing as it does on the experience of Anglo-Saxon, and liberal welfare regimes, and leading international financial institutions (Harvey, 2005; Craig and Cotterell, 2007). Their chronological phasing marks progression from 'proto-neoliberalism' on the edges of Keynesian economic and welfare state

thinking, to a 'roll back' phase where the force of neoliberalism is on the dismantling of the Keynesian state institutions and practices to a third, roll out phase addressing the social and economic outcomes of policies and practices of the roll back phase. Whilst acknowledging that such progression is manifested differently in local spaces, these phases have nevertheless been equated in North American and Anglo-European contexts as coinciding with shifts into and through Reaganism and Thatcherism, and then into 'Third Way' approaches of Clinton/Blair (Imrie and Raco, 2003; Boyle and Rogerson, 2006).

Accompanying the metamorphosis of neoliberalism into a more socially interventionist, 'third way' form of 'roll-out neoliberalism' has been a shift in the ways in which 'place rating' has been conducted. One expression of these has been the adoption of more cooperative, less competitive forms of comparison. In Europe and in Australasia, for example, the fashion of place rating comparisons has been replaced in part with 'benchmarking' comparisons. Networks of cities for collaborative functions have emerged, and through a recognition of common and shared experiences, joint projects, information sharing and co-operation between cities and between agencies has emerged (Luque-Martínez and Muñoz-Leiva, 2005; Floeting and Hollbach-Grömig, 2005). As part of this, greater harmonisation towards an agreed standard for measuring cities based on economic realities has emerged (Freeman, 2007). Although such collaboration has been criticised - "the reality, in our view, is that such benchmarking does little to promote "levelling up" between places and may actually serve to reinforce existing inequalities" (Greene et al., 2007, 17) – examples such as the innovative Melbourne benchmarking study (Stokie, 1998) has shown the utility of this more collegial approach to placed ratings.

In the United States, such cooperative ratings have largely been absent within a form of place competitiveness where attracting and retaining capital remains dominant. Whilst promoting place rating guides, such emphasis on the relationship between local urban politics and economic activity within North America has tended to overshadow one of the original key intentions of the PRA. In each of the editions, the authors have signalled that for them the focus of place ratings was on people and communities – on the quality of life, amenities and qualities of place that influenced people's everyday life and made them attractive to live, not just to be economically competitive. Here too the PRA challenged underlying assumptions. Traditionally it was assumed that only companies competed, with communities considered part of a firm's *comparative advantage*, like access to resources or labour, but not of themselves competing. As late as 1991 when Michael Porter produced his national competitiveness strategy for the Canadian government (Porter, 1991) this assumption was still had considerable currency. Yet even then the transition from nationally-based industrial economies to knowledge-based economies with global reach was well underway. As knowledge became increasingly the primary competitive resource in world economic activity, the source of knowledge, people, has become the focus of economic development and the generation of firm *competitive advantage*. Accordingly, the recognition of the hard to duplicate *regional advantage* (Saxenian, 1994) has pushed communities to the forefront of the competitiveness debate.

Today it is generally recognized that communities compete with each other on taxation and regulation, on infrastructure and transportation, on quality of life, on the all important issues of the attraction, retention and development of human capital, as well as on the more familiar firm decisions investment and access to financial capital (Harvey, 1978; Tremblay and Tremblay, 2006). In turn those overseeing the governance of these communities have aggressively adopted and used ratings such as the PRA as indicators both of their particular *regional advantage* and of their

success in offering local community-base advantages. As one of the more recent competitors to the PRA states:

“quality of life involves being able to afford to tap into the American Dream of a middle class lifestyle. To them, access to good tickets to La Bohème is not nearly as important as access to good public schools, or being able to afford to own their own home, or to live in neighborhoods where they are [not] in constant fear of being a victim of crime.”
(Expansion Management, 2007)

This aspect of the PRA has been enlivened by Richard Florida’s recent analysis of the future of cities. His focus is on one sub-group of these communities – the creative talents – which he perceives as central to economic and social success in the new global competition for key people with innovative and creative capacity (Florida, 2002, 2005a, 2005b). In making his case for a shift from social capital to creative capital, Floridian accounts put people and place at the heart of his assessment of economic success. His rankings of place – albeit on very different but equally controversial basis than PRA – has again spotlighted the importance of the quality of place and associated quality of life for individuals.

In echoing the blossoming industry of lifestyle guides, place development manuals, and marketing guides, Florida’s interventions in the area of urban economic development policy has re-invigorated debates over place rating. With the Floridian accounts challenging traditional notions of social class and the associated utilitarian categorisations of society (Florida, 2002), in an ironic twist, some critics of Florida’s rankings on creativity have turned to PRA and similar place ratings to emphasise the more inclusive, statistically rigorous and conservative accounts which they offer (Sawicki, 2003; Peck, 2005).

Extending reach: new imperialism or comparative realities?

Place rating has not of course just been restricted to comparisons within national boundaries. Reflecting the global patterns of movement, especially of those perceived to be most likely to pay heed to rankings – *the ‘globalites’*, the professional and managerial classes who both shape and populate the migration channels associated with global competition and business (Findlay et al., 1996; Beaverstock, 2004) – such guides too have become significant to the marketing of global and international places. Mercer Human Resource Consulting’s annual ‘worldwide quality of living survey’, or the Economist’s ‘quality of life index’ (2005) for example both offer guidance of which of the main cities or countries in the world offer the ‘best’ living. Mercer’s survey rates 215 global cities against the benchmark of New York, whilst the Economist considers life satisfaction based on objective and subjective measures.

Such international comparisons create additional problems over the comparability and reliability of data, often restricting the number of components of ‘quality’ being assessed. Over the 25 years, the PRA has avoided such issues, remaining largely unchanged in its principles and approach of assessing many characteristics of places. Minor modifications have been made to accommodate new sources of data, and the list of SMSAs has altered in line with the US federal government definitions. However, and very underplayed at the time, one of the main changes to the Almanac has been the introduction of non-US cities into the comparative analysis. The fourth edition in 1993 included a number of Canadian cities alongside the US metropolitan areas, but it was only in the fifth edition that the Canadian contribution was acknowledged and featured on the cover, enabling the

authors to lay claim to the identification of “North America’s best all-around metro areas”.

The adoption of this more continental perspective arguably represents the growing challenge to the ‘taken for granted’ status of the nation scale, and the corresponding rise in regional hegemonies in the new post-Fordist political economy (Jessop, 2002). First, such comparisons align well with the concept of a ‘North American city’; arising from an ongoing convergence of Canadian and US economic interests under NAFTA (Lipset, 1990; Garber and Imbroscio, 1996). Such protagonists for a continental perspective argue that the forces of technology, economic and cultural globalisation have created a transnational urban system where the primacy of the differences between Canadian and US cities are being replaced with the primacy of their commonalities. For instance, in Canada or the US worker and firm mobility seem governed by many of the same constituent elements of regional advantage leading to a minimization of national differences. They suggest that counterarguments have tended to focus on historically engrained differences of culture and attitudes, and declining differences in municipal level powers (Ewing, 1992; Zolnik, 2004). Other researchers remain sceptical of such comparativeness, stressing that despite some similarities there remain distinct features which separated the US and Canada in terms of quality of life and urban liveability (Bourne, 1999; Mercer and England, 2000; Tremblay, 2004).

Second, the PRA’s inclusion of Canadian cities could be viewed as commercially astute given the increasing and different flows of people from Canada to the US. During the 1990s there was a marked flow of migrants travelling over the border – on average 20,000 per annum from Canada to the US, totalling 180,700 between 1993 and 2001 and over the ten year period 1996-2005 more than 273,000 on the reverse direction. But secondly, it also tapped into the changing nature of this migration stream, as migrants no longer sought (or required) to be permanent US citizens in order to gain advantages in the labour and housing markets or be permanent residents in Canada. Instead, the majority of migrants became more short term ‘opportunity seekers’. In contrast to the previous decade when 1 in 3 of Canadians moving to the US became a naturalized US citizen, fewer than 10% sought this in the 1990s (Table 1).

The PRA has not been alone in recognising these cross-border opportunities and flows, but other rating almanacs have employed alternative ways to accommodate differences between the US and Canada. One of the more recent guides - *Cities Ranked and Rated* (CRR) by Sperling and Sander first published in 2004 (and with the 2007 edition being published as this paper was finalised) - immediately adopted a similar ‘North American’ perspective. Like the PRA it has proved to be a commercial success and methodologically it too is based on an analysis of the characteristics of MSAs in the US and Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) in Canada. Covering *statistics* on population, economy and employment, cost of living, climate, education, crime, transportation) alongside *ratings* on leisure (restaurant, golf, ski, sports, inland water, parks, quality of life) and arts and culture (libraries, classical music, ballet/dance, museums) the CRR is a direct competitor to the PRA.

In an effort to offer a unique take in this competitive market, the CRR provides not only rankings and prosaic statistical interpretation, but also a descriptive focus on each metropolitan place in the guide. Even with a restricted international component, and with the authors having a strong pedigree in place ratings – Sperling created the original Money Magazine ‘best places’ list – the inclusion of Canadian cities has stretched the US-based authors.

First, their local knowledge of places is more restricted. The claim under Edmonton for example that 'The main ridge of the Rocky Mountains is visible to the west ...' (Sperling and Sander, 2004, p.735) can be challenged. Checking with Tourism Alberta representatives, they indicated that 'The Rocky Mountains are not visible from the City of Edmonton. However, the Rockies are visible from the City of Calgary.' Indeed, Edmonton is 229 miles (366 km) away from Jasper in the middle of the Rockies whereas Banff, another ski resort, is only 80 miles (128 km) from Calgary. Or, under Sherbrooke (Quebec), "Sherbrooke is a bicultural industrial center ..." (op.cit., p.756). Sherbrooke is actually a university town with a growing biotechnology sector, and home to two (2) universities : *Université de Sherbrooke* (35,000 students and 5,600 employees), which has a medical school, and Bishop's University (founded in 1843, 2,350 students from Canada and 45 other countries). At 42,950, the university population amounts to a substantial proportion of the 153,000 urban population of Sherbrooke (28%) and influences the high proportion (1 in 5) with University degrees.

But secondly and more importantly, Sperling and Sander struggle to correlate Canadian and US cities given the different statistical bases. Consequently they admit that "the approach is more qualitative..." (p728) with comparisons made with a "US counterpart" on the basis of the author's judgement on where the "Canadian city might fall if the places [in the US and Canada] ...were ranked together" (p728). The resultant amalgamation (Table 2) creates some intriguing outcomes of rankings and narrative. London, Ontario is compared with Lansing-East Lansing (Michigan) and given comparable rankings (165th and 162nd respectively) but Halifax, Nova Scotia is compared with both Portland, Maine (236th) and Boston, Massachusetts (71st) being given an equivalent rank of 150th. Other Canadian cities are 'truly unique' and the authors struggle to show comparisons. Montréal and New Orleans are described as having comparable traits, 'culturally and geographically' but are ranked poles apart – Montreal is ranked the equivalent of 30th in the US list, New Orleans ranks 139th.

The authors of the Places Rated Almanac avoid such pitfalls by searching out more comparable statistical evidence, enabling them to include their Canadian CMAs within the same list as US places and provide a truer sense of the North American ratings. In this respect they have remained a 'market leader'.

In focussing on Canadian cities as comparators with US locations, both guides can be critiqued for promoting a specific 'cultural nationalism'; one based on shared cultural heritages and values of the predominantly white and Anglo-based perspectives of the two nations. Why do these guides not include comparisons with Mexican cities which offer potentially similar relationships between southern US cities and their southern counterparts? This question is all the more pertinent when migration flows from Mexico to the US provide a potentially much larger market – between 15 and 20 times the size of that of Canadian migrants (Table 3). One clue for such absences might be the nature of the migration streams from Canada to the US. According to the US 2000 Census, more than 52% of movers from Canada to the US over the decades hold 'management, professional and related occupations' with one in four found in educational, health and social services. In contrast, movers from Mexico occupy only 8% managerial posts, with production and transportation (29%) and sales and office (25%) dominating.

In an era of transnational capitalism, when the cross-national place descriptive comparisons and imagined geographies have the potential to shape flows, such absences and the lack of conceptual explanations of the basis of the

comparative geographies of these guides leave them open to criticism as supporting forms of neo-imperialism.

Directing the 'mobilities'

The PRA and CRR almanacs – and indeed Florida's (2002) ratings of US cities in terms of a 'creativity index' - explicitly encourage mobility. They are a clarion call to 'greener pastures' for those who are considering, or those who may be tempted to consider, relocation – the '**mobilities**'. By this we refer to those who have the capacity to move but need to be stimulated and guided in their spatial movements. Whilst many people may have the potential and actual capacity to be mobile both geographically and socially – what Kaufmann et al. (2004) have termed 'motility' – this can remain latent, requiring to be awakened and then guided towards opportunities elsewhere. Such awakening can be of the individual mobility and those responsible for offering the place qualities which are attractive in enticing or retaining the individual.

The built-in assumption in the PRA and CRR almanacs is that place ratings will be used by mobilities to inform themselves of where to move. Evidence of such connections between published ratings and actual mobility remains under-researched and thus it is difficult to assess directly whether PRAs are effective or instrumental in attracting people – and importantly the 'right' people – into communities and places. Analysis of recent (1995-2000) patterns of gross and net migration between SMSAs within the US offer weak correlations with the rankings in the PRA in 2000 (see Rogerson et al., 2007). Even if the focus is restricted to the top destinations for internal movers, there are only 2 in the top 10 rated places in the PRA (Rayleigh and Phoenix). Extending this to the top 30 rankings however does include 11 of the top 30 most common destinations for movers within the US (Table 4).

Getting an understanding of the stimuli and reasons for relocation of the more than 120 million US citizens who changed their place of residence in the 1995-2000 period is always going to be partial. Whether and to what extent guides to places actually matter in the process of stimulating and directing movers remains an area ripe for research, but one which will require to focus on specific relocators. The evidence to date that quality of life and quality of place factors shape mobility remains generalised (Rogerson, 1999). Within this knowledge vacuum, the authors of the PRA and similar guides continue to make assumptions that actual patterns of movement are being shaped by the availability and nature of information on places, and that they provide a 'service' to individuals and households who are searching for new destinations.

Enhancing communities

Even without such an evidential base to evaluate their impact in this respect, it is clear that the almanacs are rooted in the notions of mobility as beneficial to economic (and social) wellbeing. Increasingly, however, under different forms of 'roll out' neoliberalist regulation in the US (and elsewhere), alternative forms of local based engagement have been formulated, placing greater emphasis on constructing a stronger sense of attachment to place. This is in sharp contrast to the weakening of place ties evident in the 'roll back' neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Peck, 2004) when government encouraged people 'to get on their bikes' as a solution to problems in their lives and communities.

Further whether expressed through the Third Way of Clinton or the more neo-conservatist approach of Bush, the political slant of roll out neoliberalism has reinforced the importance of the social aspects of place over the economic ones. As Tickell and Peck (2003) express it, one element of this evolved form of neoliberalism has been its focus on the 'downstream' consequences of economic liberalisation – such as crime and social exclusion. In pursuing local urban and regional policies which give renewed importance to tackling such dystopian anxieties associated with 'community' (Sennett, 2003; Baeten, 2002), policy practitioners have placed increasing emphasis on recruiting current residents as 'active citizens' in the revitalisation of places. The resultant rush to support social networks, voluntary associations and more generally to engender social capital (Cole and Goodchild, 2000; Arthurson, 2002; Boyle and Rogerson, 2006) all reinforce the desire to retain those very groups that under roll back neoliberal programs were being encouraged to move. Whilst the PRA spoke to this earlier agenda, the Almanac also resonates the 'roll out' neoliberal policy arena.

Although here too empirical evidence is limited on the positive retentive benefits of quality of life and quality of place, conceptually it is clear that amongst potential mobilites, who have the capacity to move, there is scope for them to be anchored by improvements and new opportunities within the existing communities.

So how can PRA assist in this anchoring to place? One possibility is as a tool for social learning amongst communities. The PRA and other similar rankings can provide a catalyst for social learning and a tool for determining which type of collective learning is appropriate. It is the cognitive dissonance such rankings generate between the 'on the ground' reality and the reality suggested by the rankings that cause people to reflect on the question of what's right. This dissonance can often lead to collective learning by way of 'learning by doing', 'single-' or 'double-loop' learning (Argyris and Schön, 1974). The rankings act somewhat like a mirror, enabling reflective evaluation and diagnosis.

Where the ranking results are not as expected, then they can assist community representatives to:

- a) clean the mirror by suggesting changes to what is being measured or how it is being measured (*learning by doing* or *metacognitive process*). Since the measures are never assumed to be perfect, a trial and error process over time will likely ensue, gradually improving the quality of the rankings feedback. The criticisms and complaints associated with the early editions of the PRA are consistent with this type of learning but have also informed the Oregon Benchmarks studies (Schlossberg and Zimmermann, 2003) and the Austin, Texas quality of life priorities (Myers, 1989)
- b) change the community strategies (*single loop learning*) trying different approaches to affect different outcomes. This implies both the governing variables and the measurement tools are accepted as correct as is reflected in the fashion of undertaking new urban planning studies, cluster studies, community market studies in vogue with municipal governments since the mid 1990s. In the UK, the Nottingham Common Purpose exemplified this, germinating local discussion and feedback loops on how regeneration and improvement approaches were resonating and impacting on local communities.
- c) change the community's basic governing variables such as assumptions, goals, governance mechanisms, values, etc. and then define an entirely new type of strategy (*double loop learning*) that is being reflected in smart growth planning,

ecology based planning, one system planning efforts and usually involving a collaborative, community-wide process. One example is the adoption by City of Melbourne Council, Australia through their liveability study and the subsequent quality of life aspirational indicators (Stokie, 1999).

Together such case studies merely scratch the surface of this area. Both empirical studies of local projects which engage and anchor mobilities to place, and conceptual studies of links between cognitive psychology, social learning and place indicators are required to inform contemporary debates in political economy over sustaining vibrant and socially mixed communities.

New research opportunities

The tendency for successful projects such as the PRA to both be updated and mimicked is inevitable in a commercially sensitive world. The blossoming of business ratings of places is well noted (Amin and Thrift, 2002) as quality of life matters in people's lives and in their decisions of where to locate. However, as we have suggested here, commercial success is only one criterion in justification for their continuation. Whilst they can be critiqued in terms of the data, analysis and interpretation presented in each case, there are deeper issues which have perhaps been neglected in recent discussions of place ratings. As the zero sum game of competition for capturing of mobile economic capital has been recognised, questions about the utility of place ratings need to shift. First, there are issues about whether there are benefits to be derived from comparative rankings which cross international boundaries, especially when such league tables of economic opportunities appeal to a limited and highly mobile group of human capital. What is their relevance when many of those responsible for place marketing seek less competitive and more cooperative benchmarking comparisons? How do such comparisons relate to new forms of institutional and governance forms which have emerged under roll out neoliberalism? And, in the process of constructing comparisons between places, what embedded, if unintentional, cultural and neo-imperialism is being promoted?

Second, what evidence is there to indicate that place ratings have any particular impact on people's behaviour or patterns of mobility? The assumption of latent mobility implicit within PRA, CRR and similar ratings has largely been unchallenged. Whilst such an absence has not undermined the utility of ratings in the era of economic-led competition, it cannot remain so when there are more diverse agendas operating under roll out neoliberalism. As the focus switches to more community-base and social issues – witnessed for example by more cooperative frames for benchmarking and policy agendas emphasising the retention of mobilities in the context of sustainable communities – there is an increased requirement for a stronger evidential base of the connections between place ratings and the processes of migration.

And thirdly, what locally do such place ratings offer to residents of place and communities? This question takes on greater import when the political economy contexts shifts towards building and supporting local places for themselves under a social-led agenda of roll out of 'third way' approaches. In particular, more research is required on the ways if any in which local communities have been able to utilise place rankings in the development of social capital and social learning.

As renewed interest is expressed in academic and policy communities in local quality of life, in building sustainable communities, and in new forms of place management, more critical engagement with PRA and comparable place ratings is needed. Although the popularity of such guides may remain evident to those involved

in their production, 25 years on there continues to be a need for more research into their significance for and impact within communities.

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Table 1 : Cross-border flows: Canada to US

Canada to US movement					
<i>entered</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Naturalised</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Non-US citizen</i>	<i>%</i>
1990-2000	243950	21340	8.7	222610	91.3
1980-1989	100670	32095	31.9	68585	68.1
before 1980	476145	324625	68.2	151520	31.8

Source: US Census Bureau, Census 2000 Special Tabulations (STP-159)

Table 2: North American migration to the United States, 1993-2001

Year	Canada (000s)	% total immigration	Mexico (000s)	% total immigration
1993	23.9	2.64	126.6	14.00
1994	22.2	2.76	6111.4	13.85
1995	18.1	2.51	90.0	12.49
1996	21.8	2.38	163.7	17.87
1997	15.8	1.98	146.7	18.37
1998	14.3	2.18	130.7	19.97
1999	12.9	2.00	146.4	22.64
2000	21.5	2.53	171.7	20.20
2001	30.2	2.84	204.8	19.24

Source: US Census Bureau, Statistical Abstracts, 2003

Table 3: Comparing Canadian and US cities: CRR's 2004 rankings

Canadian Metropolitan Area	Canada rank	Comparable US rank	Canadian Metropolitan Area	Canada rank	Comparable US rank
Vancouver, BC	1	20	London	15	165
Montreal, Quebec	2	30	Kingston	16	180
Victoria,	3	35	Thunder Bay	17	190
Ottawa-Hull	4	35	Regina	18	195
Toronto	5	40	Trois-Rivieres	19	200
Calgary	6	65	Hamilton	20	230
Quebec City	7	65	Oshawa	21	235
Edmonton	8	70	Sherbrooke	22	245
Winnipeg	9	75	Windsor	23	265
Abbotsford, BC	10	90	Kitchener-Waterloo	24	270
St Catharines-Niagara	11	120	Saint John	25	290
Saskatoon	12	130	Chicoitimi-Jonquiere	26	310
Halifax	13	150	Sudbury	27	320
St John's	14	160			

Source: Sperling and Sander (2004) Cites Ranked and Rated p728

Table 4: Comparing Top 30 PRA Locations to Absolute In-Migration Rank

MSA	PRA Rank 2000	Total In-migrants	Absolute In- migration Rank
Salt Lake City--Ogden, UT	1	163782	47
Washington, DC--MD--VA--WV (PMSA)	2	609427	3
Seattle--Bellevue--Everett, WA (PMSA)	3	352801	18
Tampa--St. Petersburg--Clearwater, FL	4	394574	13
Denver, CO (PMSA)	5	356933	17
Raleigh--Durham--Chapel Hill, NC	6	260019	28
Houston, TX (PMSA)	8	433254	10
Minneapolis--St. Paul, MN--WI	9	130563	59
Phoenix--Mesa, AZ	10	582206	4
Cincinnati, OH--KY--IN (PMSA)	11	166121	46
Pittsburgh, PA	12	149474	52
Knoxville, TN	13	101225	77
Louisville, KY--IN	14	616948	2
San Francisco, CA (PMSA)	15	241013	32
Orange County, CA (PMSA)	16	363701	15
Miami, FL PMSA	17	31559	226
San Diego, CA	19	424318	11
Austin--San Marcos, TX	20	279963	25
New Orleans, LA	21	104314	70
Orlando, FL	22	336832	20
Indianapolis, IN	23	191705	42
Honolulu, HI	24	105760	69
Greensboro--Winston-Salem--High Point, NC	25	170636	45
Portland--Vancouver, OR--WA (PMSA)	26	283841	24
San Jose, CA (PMSA)	27	201139	40
Cleveland--Lorain--Elyria, OH (PMSA)	28	154079	50
Philadelphia, PA--NJ (PMSA)	29	374787	14
Rochester, NY	30	89588	86
Nashville, TN	30	35836	209

MSA	PRA Rank 2000	Total In-migrants	Absolute In- migration Rank
Syracuse, NY	32	69412	110

Sources: Savageau (2000) p579-85
 US Census Bureau, 2000 Table PHC-T-22