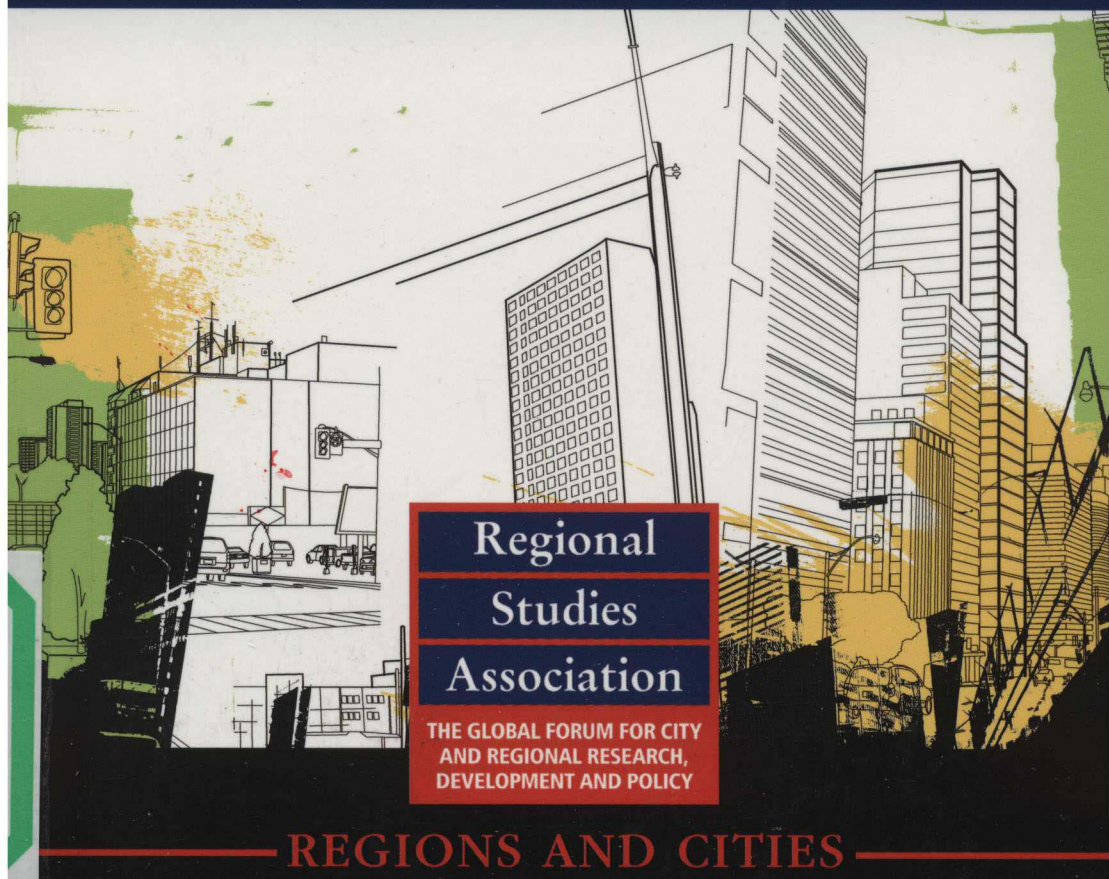


# CULTURAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SMALL CITIES



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THE GLOBAL FORUM FOR CITY  
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DEVELOPMENT AND POLICY

— REGIONS AND CITIES —

EDITED BY ANNE LORENTZEN  
AND BAS VAN HEUR

# Cultural Political Economy of Small Cities

Edited by Anne Lorentzen and  
Bas van Heur



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# Cultural Political Economy of Small Cities

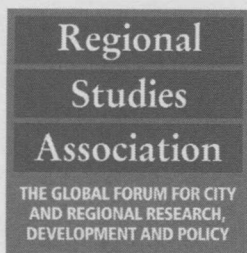
The volume highlights ongoing changes in the political economy of small cities in relation to the field of culture and leisure. Culture and leisure are focal points both to local entrepreneurship and to planning by city governments, which means that these developments are subject to market dynamics as well as to political discourse and action. Public-private partnerships as well as conflicts of interest characterise the field, and a major issue related to the strategic development of culture and leisure is the balance between market and welfare.

This field is gaining importance in most cities today in planning, production and consumption, but to the extent that these changes have drawn academic attention it has focused on large, metropolitan areas and on creative clusters and flagship high culture projects. Smaller cities and their often substantively different cultural strategies have been largely ignored, thus leading to a huge gap in our knowledge on contemporary urban change. By bringing together a number of case studies as well as theoretical reflections on the cultural political economy of small cities, this volume contributes to an emerging small cities research agenda and to the development of policy-relevant expertise that is sensitive to place-specific cultural dynamics.

In taking this approach, the volume hopes to contribute to emerging research on culture and leisure economies by developing a differentiated spatial dimension to it, without which sustainable urban strategies cannot be developed. This book integrates perspectives of economic development with questions of governance and equity in relation to the fields of culture and leisure planning and development. This book should be of interest to students and researchers of Urban Studies and Planning, Regional Studies and Economics, as well as Sociology and Geography.

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# 1 Introduction

## Cultural political economy of small cities

*Anne Lorentzen and Bas van Heur*

### Theme and aims

This volume highlights changes in the political economy of small cities in relation to the fields of culture and leisure. Culture and leisure are focal points both to local entrepreneurship and to planning by city governments, which means that these developments are subject to market dynamics as well as to political discourse and action (Lorentzen and Hansen 2009). Public–private partnerships as well as conflicts of interests characterise the field, and a major issue related to the strategic development of culture and leisure is the balance between market and welfare.

This field is gaining importance in most cities today in planning, production and consumption, but to the extent that these changes have drawn academic attention it has focused on large, metropolitan areas and on creative clusters and flagship high culture projects. Smaller cities and their often substantively different cultural strategies have largely been ignored, thus leading to a huge gap in our knowledge on contemporary urban change. By bringing together a number of case studies as well as theoretical reflections on the cultural political economy of small cities, this volume contributes to an emerging small cities research agenda (Bell and Jayne 2009; Jayne *et al.* 2010) and to the development of policy-relevant expertise that is sensitive to place-specific dynamics.

In taking this approach, the volume has three key aims. First of all, we aim to contribute to the emerging research programme on small cities and go beyond the current empirical studies in this area by combining theoretical development with case studies. The theorisation of smaller cities in the context of complex urban hierarchies remains underdeveloped, which limits a more comparative understanding of the role of city size in urban change. Second, we hope to contribute to emerging research on culture and leisure economies by paying particular attention to the spatial and scalar dynamics of these economies, since a more sophisticated understanding of these dynamics is necessary for the development of sustainable urban strategies. Third, we aim to address not only the economic development dimensions of culture and leisure, but explicitly highlight questions of political governance and social equity.

**Culture and leisure: stable signifiers, shifting signifieds**

In focusing on the field of culture and leisure, we acknowledge that this field has become one of the key sites of development attention for cities across the world over the last two decades. There are many reasons for this, the most important being the general expansion of cultural consumption (van Eijck and van Oosterhout 2005) and the culturalisation of the economy as such (Lash and Urry 1994; Du Gay and Pryke 2002). In order to get a better analytical grip on this shift, however, it is important to move beyond generic statements of societal change and to specify what exactly is taking place, where and when. This necessitates a preliminary unpacking of the notions of culture and leisure. In the mainstream academic and policy debates, at least three distinct (although empirically intertwined) strands of argument can be identified (for a more extensive discussion, see van Heur and Peters 2011). First, culture and leisure are seen to play an important role in attracting tourists and other visitors. Due to globalisation and increased mobility, cities have become sites to experience and urban landscapes are redesigned in order to become attractive to the tourist gaze (Urry 2002). This leads to the paradoxical situation in which cities market their supposedly unique locational qualities to a global audience in strikingly similar ways. As a result, cultural tourism plays an important role in the globalisation and homogenisation of cultures (Nederveen Pieterse 2009), although it simultaneously can also contribute to the revitalisation of city districts and to the development of new publics for local cultural workers.

Second, the discourse on the creative industries as engines of economic innovation has profoundly shaped the debate on culture and leisure. In this narrative, the creative field of the city can be seen as a system of resources, providing materials for imaginative appropriation by individuals and groups as they pursue the business of work and life in urban space (Scott 2010a: 123). The very definition of what constitutes the creative industries is a continuing matter for discussion, but most sectoral definitions highlight established cultural sectors such as film, television, theatre, music, visual arts and design as well as new media and ICT. The role of local governments is seen to lie in the support of these networks and clusters of production and consumption. Highlighting the entrepreneurial dynamics of creative work, the policy discourse on the creative industries tends to emphasise the innovative potential of these sectors, but mostly downplays the reality of underpaid labour (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009; Gill and Pratt 2009) and the recurring exclusions along the lines of gender, ethnicity, age and class within the creative industries (Oakley 2006).

And third, the debate on cultural planning offers a more inclusive and less economistic approach by shifting attention towards the social relevance of culture (Evans 2005). The idea that culture through cultural planning should be placed at the centre of local government processes has been advocated by leading consultants such as Charles Landry from the 1980s onwards (Stevenson 2005: 38). In the United Kingdom, the idea emerged that it was possible to dig civic gold by tapping into a tradition of volunteerism and generating funding for

cultural initiative (Stevenson 2004: 121). One problem, of course, is that 'culture' in this debate becomes such a broad notion that operationalisation turns out to be rather difficult. Not only is culture expected to solve cultural policy problems, it is also mobilised to address problems identified in other fields, such as spatial planning, welfare and education (Gray 2006). All in all, however, this more inclusive approach tends to aim for at least some kind of balance between economic, social and cultural concerns.

Even this very brief sketch of these three distinct lines of argument shows the complexity and diversity of the debate on culture and leisure. It also indicates the necessity to pay detailed attention to exactly how the terminology of culture and leisure is used in particular cities at particular times. As the following chapters in this volume show, even though virtually all actors in the cities discussed have appropriated this terminology, there is great diversity in usage with actors implicitly or explicitly drawing on one or more of the three discursive strands just discussed in often quite idiosyncratic ways. This points to the strategic usage of notions such as culture and leisure with actors referring to these notions in order to achieve often quite different objectives. In that respect, culture and leisure are best understood as 'stable signifiers' characterised by 'shifting signifieds' (Alexander 2007: 28). These signifieds shift through the contestation and creative appropriation of terminology or, in other words, it is the shifting of symbolic boundaries that can contribute to the transformation of social boundaries. Any *cultural* political economy that takes seriously the relative autonomy of meaning construction will need to pay attention to these boundary disputes.

### **Cultural political economy and the analysis of urban strategies**

In referring to cultural political economy, we take our cue from what is sometimes referred to as the Lancaster School CPE project (Jones 2008) and which has largely been developed by Bob Jessop, Ngai-Ling Sum and their colleagues and students. Drawing on a complex amalgam of Marxist political economy, the regulation approach, institutional economics, critical realism and Antonio Gramsci, the Lancaster CPE project aims to acknowledge the cultural turn in the social sciences while simultaneously holding on to the 'bigger' claims of the political economy tradition. The goal of CPE, in other words, becomes to resist the temptation of 'soft economic sociology', which subsumes 'economic or political categories under general sociological (or cultural) analysis so that the analysis loses sight of the historical specificity and materiality of economics and the dynamics of state power' (Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008: 1168). This can indeed be understood as the key contribution of CPE in comparison to mainstream cultural economy: whereas the latter – with its grounding in a cultural studies tradition – tends to be highly sensitive to the complexity of cultural-economic practices in specific sites, the CPE approach has developed a sophisticated vocabulary to conceptualise the ways in which these practices and sites become stabilised (if at all) over longer periods of time and on multiple scales.