

Peripheral, Marginal and Border Regional Issues in Europe

Introduction

The RSA Research Network was established in 2008 at the RSA International Conference in Prague and has met subsequently on three occasions: in Norway, Scotland and Belgium. The RSA Research Network has been a popular innovation in the regional studies and development field, with over 150 joining the network, and significant numbers participating in meetings and seeking further actions to progress the research and policy agenda. This note reports on the meetings convened to date, the proposals for publications and indicates the future plans for continuation and expansion of the network.

Inauguration

The RSA Research Network was launched at a well-attended session (about 30 delegates) of the RSA International Conference ~ *Regions: The Dilemmas of Integration and Competition?* in Prague, 26-29 May 2008. After a presentation on the rationale, aims and objectives of the RSA Research Network, the organisers examined and explored the origins and meanings of the key terms in the title: “peripheral” and “marginal”. This provoked sufficient interest and debate to confirm there was a need and demand for this venture.

The RSA Research Network is focussed on the theme ***Peripherality, marginality and border issues***. The organisers developed the idea and attracted interests and concerns over the position and attention given to such regions across the globe, but particularly within a Europe where cities and city-regions are dominating the research and policy agenda. The topic received momentous interest and gathered an initial network of over 150 scientists and practitioners and continues to expand with new interested parties. The Network’s aims of bringing together facilities, expertise, experience and resources focused on peripheral and marginal regions fostering knowledge exchange and more significant cooperation across borders over time were to be complemented by publications, applications for grants and other activities.

Much research and attention has been paid to the regions in the core of Europe - and especially to cities, city-regions and old industrial areas, and to some of their underlying characteristics - such as clusters, agglomeration phenomena generally, regional innovation systems. In this environment, the specific features of peripheral and marginal regions have been relatively neglected and many actors located in non-core areas of Europe face obstacles and challenges in applying locally the theories and strategies appropriate to the centre. To address this, there is a clear need for a theoretical and methodological foundation complemented by a systematisation of best-case and worse-case practices. The meetings of the RSA Research Network provided the forum for this agenda to be explored.

Rena, Norway: 9-10th October 2008

The first full meeting was held in a small relatively isolated town in rural Norway, as the autumn was beginning to herald in winter. The long journey to the venue for most participants and the cold mornings while most of the continent was still warm provided a background that demonstrated why peripheral and marginal regions are in a different environment. Despite the costs and difficulties of attending, there were 24

participants from 9 countries, mostly from northern Nordic and Celtic Europe (see Appendix A for programme and participants). There were many more papers than anticipated and parallel sessions were required to accommodate all the quality submissions received. There were plenary papers to introduce and conclude the event, with ample discussion and networking opportunities built into the programme. One particular highlight was offered by the local mayor who embedded the discussions within the political, social, historical and geographical context of Hedmark and its environs.

Paisley, Scotland: 12-13th March 2009

The Spring 2009 meeting provided much continuity from the Rena event with a good deal of overlap in participants, presentations and subject matter. However, this was supplemented by new voices and concerns brought by academics and practitioners from across the northern periphery (with 24 participants from 7 countries; see Appendix B for programme and participants). Discussions and developments maintained the high levels of quality and relevance from the earlier seminars, with new dimensions of culture and islands to the fore. As before, the interactions and parallels across the lands of the peripheral and marginal regions were inherent to the papers, debates and networking. The deepening of the network and activities was evidenced in dialogues over the more theoretical approaches and applications which ran through the two days of the seminar. This meeting concluded with the complementary launch of the Scottish Centre for island Studies (SCIS) based at the University of the West of Scotland, where insularity was recognised as especially but not exclusively related to the particular circumstances beyond the mainland.

Leuven, Belgium: 6-8th April 2009

The final event of this first phase of the RSA Research Network's activities was located within the RSA International Conference ~ *Understanding and Shaping Regions: Spatial, Social and Economic Futures* in Leuven, 6-8 April 2009. This again attracted appreciable interest within the overall programme, against some stiff parallel opposition, with a programme of coherent papers within sessions on *Contemporary Issues on Peripherality, Marginality and Cross-Border Co-operation*, *Rural Development and Innovation* and *Peripherality and Rural Economic Development*. These sessions allowed the first year to be brought to a conclusion with excellent sessions on the work of an ever expanding network of researchers concerned with peripheral and marginal regions, with some connections across to the perennial issues of border territories.

Summary of Research Network's Conclusions

1. All presenters live in and work in the northern periphery of Europe. In many contexts (e.g. within the Economics or Political Sciences disciplines in UK higher education), research on the periphery is marginal to the careers of these individuals and their colleagues, or is treated as of lesser worth in publications, promotions and allied areas. This may well suggest new core-periphery problems for researchers. There may also be unwarranted criticism of the roles and motives of those who do sustain this research effort, with questioning of their objectivity for instance.
2. The counterfactual is a legitimate area for research; rather than simple adoption of core values, strategies and policies, exploration of alternatives of and for the region should be pursued. This suggests deeper analyses and

understanding are required from researchers, therefore those with a perception of the issues and contexts should be at the forefront of such activities.

3. There are a series of interlinked issues from this: the core or centre often sets the agenda for everywhere, as if every region had the same system-defining characteristics and technical relations throughout the economic and social environment, this can be leading to misguided analyses, actions and policies; the core directly or through guidance can impose or encourage solutions to non-problems, raising the question of who drives the agenda for such regions; the periphery is often coerced into adopting inappropriate approaches instead of finding its own way; contrary to this local solutions are often seen from the core as attacks on property rights with the community's demands to keep the area viable and inhabited counter to the centre's aspatial concerns.
4. There can be notable differences between gross and net impacts and returns in the peripheral and marginal region with high leakages out of the local economy. This makes detailed analyses of activities necessary in ways that would not apply to large metropolitan areas where the losses are minimised through local capture of spillovers.
5. Dynamic effects and cumulative causation often work to the detriment of the periphery and to the benefit of the core region and, through leakages from the former and inflows to the latter, with positive feedback effects dominating in both counter to the neoclassical economic equilibrium model.
6. Social capital within (bonding) and between (bridging) communities can be especially important in allaying some of the above effects but whilst many are orientated between core and periphery or between the city and its city-region, perhaps more needs to be done to promote active links within the community of peripheral and marginal regions in northern Europe. Networking and partnerships between these regions would allow learning and more effective dissemination of theories, practice and analysis within their arc of commonality.
7. In times when work-life balance is being revised, there is a benefit of redefining the respective roles and influence of the periphery and the core.
8. Successful role models from regions, their actors and analysts are required to promote the voice of the periphery and the marginal. This RSA Research Network has identified a niche for itself in that agenda.

Future Activities

A selection of papers have been brought together in a book proposal to the *RSA Cities and Regions* series with T&F.

Applications for grants for establishing the network more sustainably are being made to Nordic and other bodies.

Application to RSA to follow for follow-on funding to allow further meetings to be held over the coming two years.

Sessions being offered to international conferences in northern Europe.

Website and database being established.

Appendices

To be added for initial proposal, participants and programmes for Rena and Paisley.