Reviews/Comptes rendus


The editors assert that three "Shock Waves" (the rise of the information economy, new international trade agreements, and reductions in public spending) will affect the Maritime urban system and (although this is never demonstrated) that "the information economy is without doubt the most powerful, the most pervasive and the most relentless of the three shocks to hit the system".

There is no discussion of why only Maritime and not Atlantic Canadian cities are considered. As this excludes any consideration of St. John's, one of the region's only three CMA's, and the second-largest urban centre it is a significant omission.

The book's twelve chapters were produced by eight principal and four second authors, half of whom are associated with the Université de Moncton and/or the CIRRD. At the outset of Part I ("The Maritime Urban System in Transition") Larry McCann provides an elegant essay on the development of the weakly-structured Maritime urban system during the Great Transformation (1867 to 1939). He argues that the long-standing export "mentalité" has hindered the development of an integrated urban network.

Rodolphe Lamarche attempts to demonstrate that the rise of the service economy has led to the increasing integration of the larger urban centres into a Toronto-centred system. The arguments are based primarily on inter-urban air passenger data, although labour force components, head office location patterns and a form of shift-share analysis are also used.

Guy Vincent and Paul Villeneuve also use air passenger data as well as a gravity model to test the proposition that east-west integration weakened and north-south integration increased between 1970 and 1990. The reliance on traffic data, and the absence of a discussion of possible problems inherent in it are of concern since corporate scheduling and routing decisions may have on the observed apparent patterns.

Benjamin Higgins asks the question: what would be the optimal process of
restructuring if the Maritimes was an independent country? What 'comparative advantage' could the Maritimes develop? He provides a good summary of the characteristics of the 'new economy' and the 'technological unemployment' that it will almost certainly cause, and concludes that only an improvement in labour force quality can provide the solution that neither the out migration of people nor an inflow of capital can.

Donald Savoie and Maurice Beaudoin argue that public policy in Canada has led to economic disincentives to work, thrift and entrepreneurship, and disrupted the ties between effort and reward. They document the heavy dependence of Maritime urban areas on the federal government, and provide a useful summary of the potential impacts of reductions in public sector expenditures, but disappointingly vague conclusions.

Dorothy Downing’s “High-Tech in Small Towns” adds little of value to the book, but reports enthusiastically on the results of unstructured interviews with representatives of ten firms operating in small towns. These are presented as examples of how the 'new economy' can lead to “exceptional new possibilities”: an idyllic but uncontextualized picture of a few success stories which begs the question of whether too much of this non-urban employment growth will enhance rather than ameliorate the problems faced by the regional urban system.

Six cities (Halifax, Sydney, Saint John, Moncton, Fredericton and Charlottetown) are the subject of Part II (“The Maritime Urban System: A necklace of cities, not all of them pearls”). Higgins’ chapter on Halifax is the best of the lot. Its central question is whether the health of Halifax matters to the rest of the Maritimes. The answer is "probably not"; a good thing since Higgins does not see the future as all that bright.

George De Benedetti shows that the former strengths of Saint John, the manufacturing hub of the Maritimes, are now weaknesses in the face of the ‘rationalization’ of Canada’s rail and port systems and national defence policy. He concludes that its capacity to adjust to changing circumstances is limited.

Donald Savoie demonstrates that Moncton is less dependent on transfer payments than Halifax, Fredericton or Charlottetown, and has a number of dynamic small firms which have been instrumental in generating the economic growth which has allowed Moncton to survive the 1988 closure of the CN Rail shops more easily than was anticipated.

A strong partnership between the University of New Brunswick and a growing number of knowledge-based industries has enabled Fredericton to develop strengths in the software industry in spite of its comparative disadvantage when compared to Kanata and Cambridge, Ontario. Here, George De Benedetti contributes a well-written chapter that actually addresses the volume’s three themes in an integrated way.

Frank Strain’s chapter on Charlottetown successfully debunks the myth that PEI is an agricultural province and that its capital is little more than a service centre. However, it is highly dependent on the welfare state, and its manufacturing sector is too small to provide protection against the anticipated declines in transfer payments. The author’s rather despondent conclusion is that the city might consider trying to attract “lifestyle” immigrants.

The covers of the book boast that it “will launch a public debate on a vitally important topic for the future of the Maritime Provinces”, and that “anyone with the slightest interest in the Maritimes, or in regional development in advanced countries in general, will find this volume invaluable”. These remarks would be more believable had they not both been made by chapter authors, but this reviewer is not convinced that the volume will be that influential in any case. It is a collection of essays that never come together. Stronger editorial control was needed to ensure that the three themes were adequately addressed in all of them. An index and a comprehensive bibliography would have been useful, as would consistency in the format of chapter endnotes and references. It would also have been interesting if the non-pearls on the necklace referred to in the title of Part II had been identified.

Some of the individual chapters, notably those by McCann, Savoie and Higgins are interesting and well written, but there are both data and analytical problems with some of the others, especially those by Lamarche and Vincent. In spite of its shortcomings, however, there are enough good things about the volume to make it interesting reading for those who are curious about the prospects of cities mired in a peripheral economy.

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