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In several senses of the phrase, Philip McCann’s *The Regional and Urban Policy of the European Union* is two useful books in one. One of these was anticipated in reading the preface, where McCann notes that the book is aimed at “two rather different audiences,” one a “range of academics, scholars, and researchers” (x) and the other audience consisting of “policy-makers working at EU, national, regional, or local governance authorities . . . for whom some of the conceptual debates seem to be abstruse” (xi). The other sense in which it is two books is that one book, consisting of chapters one through three, reads as a very well-informed and theoretically focused bibliographic review essay in regional and urban policy as generally applied to the EU. Chapters five through seven are the other book, so to speak, as McCann discusses innovation and smart specialization, and strongly advocates for smart specialization as a place-based, strategic component of EU Cohesion Policy, which is policy to reduce economic, social, and territorial regional disparities and a leading component of EU spending. Chapter four serves as the pivot point between these two “books.”

Chapter one is in part titled a “backdrop” and serves that role usefully as it provides the development context of EU member states, outlines general policy directions including the movement to “smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth” (7), catalogs the leading impacts of the 2008 global recession, and outlines the remaining chapters. Looking more deliberately at characteristics of EU regional and urban policy (chapter two), the author outlines issues of productivity, settlement scale, accessibility, connectivity, labor markets, migration, environment, governance and quality of life in terms of policy findings and implications. In these discussions, productivity comparisons between the United States and Europe are of special interest. Chapter three examines Cohesion Policy more deliberately, providing a policy history, funding streams, and an evaluation of scale and economic impacts. In the author’s judgment, the policy “contributes significantly to achieving local development goals of the recipient regions” (63),
with qualifications. This is followed by a review of the various assessments of Cohesion Policy.

Chapter 4, the pivot chapter, speaks to Cohesion Policy reform, noting reforms as needing to address an explicit place-based logic, governance partnerships, and explicitly results-oriented policy (80), as outlined by the Barca report (2009). The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to a discussion of challenges in accomplishing these reforms. In an appendix to the chapter, McCann notes the argument for “space blind” policy and the contrasting place-based arguments. He presents these not as polar opposites on the same spectrum, but rather argues for “triangulation” (116) that draws upon each of these simultaneously.

Chapters five through seven, as noted above, advocate more deliberately for the author’s policy recommendations. Chapter five is concerned with fostering regional (place-based) innovation. “A modern view of growth therefore suggests that exploitation of local distinctiveness and enhancing the advantages associated with local differentiation should very much be a central tenet of not only regional policy” and in particular those focused on “enhancing innovation and entrepreneurship” (125). This is justified by a “rapidly improving understanding of the role played by geography” (126). Smart specialization, in general and as an “explicitly geographical” and pragmatic schema, is presented in chapter six. Related to this are the concepts of technological relatedness, embeddedness, and connectivity. Working from this idea and these contexts, several types of knowledge regions (such as university-city regions) may be especially important in fostering innovation. Specific tools potentially useful in doing this would be matching grants, mini-grants, university-business lineages, and venture capital schemes, among other tools. For public sector actors to accomplish a smart specialization approach, developing a system of monitoring, evaluation, and learning is critical. Chapter seven speaks to how these policy goals, objectives, strategies, and tools can be employed to achieve success, while at the same time presenting and discussing some of the obstacles to be encountered. One point made repeatedly is that implementing these policies is less a matter of “picking winners” than it appears. Rather, it provides an environment or setting for innovation to occur.

McCann’s expertise, from both theoretical and policy perspectives, is extraordinary; an expertise made plain by his appointment the University of Groningen, range of publications (many of which are most appropriately cited in the text), his involvement in EU policy (formerly as a Special Advisor to the
European Commissioner for Regional Policy) and even the stature of those who provided feedback on chapter drafts.

As noted above, the book reads at times as a bibliographic review essay and as such shows the author’s command of the literature. The bibliography, organized by chapter, runs to 59 pages, or nearly 21 percent of the total page count.

At places throughout the book, countries, their geographic context, and specific statistics are presented textually. In many cases, this would be more digestible to the reader if presented in tabular form or using maps. Using half a page to describe the income per capita of each country in the EU (5) could be more clearly presented in a simple table, to cite just one example. That some chapter endnotes are provided as elaborate URLs is a bit cumbersome, especially given parenthetical references.

Additionally, there are three appendices for chapter four. The content of these could have been integrated into the chapter. One of these, Appendix 4A.2, reads as a dedicated and negative critique of a report that itself was critical of Cohesion Policy.

The book serves each of the stated audiences rather well. It is a useful reader in general discussions of theory and particularly for those interested in innovation and smart specialization. It is exhaustively sourced. As noted earlier, it is especially authoritative and well-informed. The writing style is deliberate, logical, and well-ordered. Despite this usefulness for the more seasoned, those newer to regional and urban policy may find the concepts and arguments a bit challenging to be readily consumed.