



Classic books in regional studies: an introduction to the 50th Anniversary Book Review Collection

Ugo Fratesi

To cite this article: Ugo Fratesi (2017) Classic books in regional studies: an introduction to the 50th Anniversary Book Review Collection, *Regional Studies*, 51:2, 346-347, DOI: [10.1080/00343404.2017.1278974](https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2017.1278974)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2017.1278974>



Published online: 09 Feb 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 143



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

EDITORIAL

Classic books in regional studies: an introduction to the 50th Anniversary Book Review Collection

Ugo Fratesi

It is now 50 years since the first issue of *Regional Studies* came out in 1967, and the context in which research and policy operate has significantly changed in that time. The way academic journals are accessed has also changed radically: the print editions are no longer the only nor even the most important ones, as most articles are now gathered and read only in electronic form. Add to this the increasing use of bibliometrics as a system of evaluating research in many countries, and it may seem as if books will soon become an obsolete way of communicating research.

However, books continue to be published and, more to the point, read. This applies to those books targeting the popularization of concepts beyond academia, but also to purely academic books. The length of a book makes it possible to develop an argument fully and present the context in which it applies, the relevant theoretical considerations, and the full evidence needed to demonstrate the validity of its claims (Walker, 2013). Many important ideas have thus been put forward, or systematized, in books because the space available makes it possible to treat topics systematically, and books normally allow more room for reflections and speculations in cases where empirical support is still difficult to measure.

Thus, some books are still read and cited despite having been published decades ago. These books have risen to such status in the literature that they can be considered classics because their influence in the field is so persistent. Classic books generally have the following two characteristics. First, they have shaped the literature on their topic, or even the entire field, by challenging the dominant paradigm at the time and introducing a new one, be it methodological or conceptual. Alternatively, they have systematized ideas that were already circulating but which needed this systematization to become established. Second, the influence of classic books is long lasting, as scholars of newer generations must address them when developing their own concepts, as shown by the fact that they are still cited decades after publication. Citations to most books, even successful ones, in fact fade out quite rapidly and tend towards zero just a few years after publication; on the contrary, the classics remain in reference lists and their citations

never fade completely but rather tend asymptotically toward a positive value.

One objective and measurable way to assess whether a book is a classic is therefore to look at the number of citations these books continue to receive. There is not (at least not yet) a comprehensive database of citations for old books, but a look at the citations in *Regional Studies* alone in the past three years provides evidence: two clear examples of the willingness to cite classic books are Alfred Marshall's *Principles of Economics* (1890), which was cited 38 times between 2014 and 2016, and Jane Jacobs's *The Economy of Cities* (1969), which was cited 32 times in the same period. This equals about one citation per issue, which would excite any bibliometric-minded department head.

Classic books have shaped their fields so deeply that their contents are almost considered common knowledge, so that it is normal to cite them in certain contexts and to refer to the ideas they contain. One senior colleague once told me that he cited a certain book (a classic) not only because he felt it was relevant but also 'because everyone expected it'. This also implies that there is often a 'vulgate' which does not necessarily adhere to the ideas of the book, meaning that classic books are often cited even by those who have not read them personally, but rather have read about them and presume to know their contents.

Some classic books are even out of print, making it necessary to rely on libraries. Combined with the scarcity of time required to read books in full, doctorate students are the academics most likely to spend their time reading the classics, which are then rediscovered after they are tenured. The result is that these books are sometimes cited inappropriately, or that some rich insights contained in them, often anticipatory of new theoretical developments which would take place only years later, are forgotten and neglected.

As one of the initiatives of the 50th anniversary of *Regional Studies*, the book review section of the journal will publish a series of reviews of books published decades ago, and whose influence has grown sufficiently that they are considered classics and milestones in regional studies. The anniversary book reviews are intended to give these

CONTACT

 ugo.fratesi@polimi.it

Department of Architecture, Built Environment and Construction Engineering, Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy.

classics their proper place in the literature by discussing their content and legacy. This requires the involvement of scholars who are themselves established and highly influential in the field through their ability to shape ideas and their broad perspective in assessing them.

Selecting classic books is not an easy task. Furthermore, *Regional Studies* is an interdisciplinary journal that covers theoretical, empirical and policy research in the field of regional studies. As such, it brings together articles from economics, geography, planning and political science, whose scope is regional and local. One selection process would be a systematic survey among scholars, but this would produce an index of popularity more than of the real innovative nature of the book. The pattern followed here has been less systematic and more customized. The author of this editorial started with a list of 60 possible influential books, basically selected from among those which he feels the need to have on his own shelves. The list only included books that were either at least 30 years old or, if more recent, written by authors no longer alive. These parameters were motivated by the fact that, in assessing the long-run impact of books, some separation in time is necessary.

The list and the personal preferences of the Book Reviews Editor were discussed at an editors' meeting, after which the list was shortened to 15 books, selected to represent the various topics that stratify in a multidisciplinary journal such as *Regional Studies*. The final cut was determined by need and opportunity; established and important scholars within their field were required to write these essays, so the reviews published will be of those books for which it was possible to find a suitable reviewer who agreed to write the essay within the short-time frame provided.

The list of those who accepted this proposal includes a number of well-known scholars who will review some of the most important classics in various disciplines related to regional studies. The final list includes Michael Batty on Peter Hall's *Cities in Civilization* (1998), Henry Yeung on Albert O. Hirschman's *The Strategy of Economic Development* (1958), Gilles Duranton on Jane Jacobs's *The Economy of Cities* (1969) and *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Steven Brakman and Harry Garretsen on Nicholas Kaldor's *Economics without Equilibrium* (1985), Peter Sunley on Marshall's *Principles of Economics* (1890), Mick Dunford on Doreen Massey's *Spatial Divisions of Labour* (1995), Eric Sheppard on Gunnar Myrdal's *Economic Theory and Underdeveloped Regions* (1957), Philip McCann on Harry W. Richardson's *Regional Growth Theory* (1973), and Michael Fritsch on Joseph A. Shumpeter's *The Theory of Economic Development* (1943).

The reviewers were asked to reread and comment on the books, reflecting in particular on the following elements: how the book has contributed to changing the landscape of the discipline; what aspects included in the book are little known but still relevant today; are there any 'new' concepts in their own field that are clearly anticipated by the book; the ways in which the actual content of the book may differ from general presumptions; and the extent to which the book is still a worthwhile read for scholars.

Thanks to those who accepted the challenge; the results are a set of essays that allow us to know these classic books better and put them in perspective. Specifically, these essays combine the characteristics of three types of reviews identified by Oinas and Leppälä (2013): they are informative, giving a reader who has not read the book recently valuable information on what the book really contains and what arguments it develops; they are evaluative, as they present personal assessments by important scholars regarding the most important and durable ideas, and the ideas which are, on the contrary, rather weak or under-developed; and, finally, they are reflective, as it would be a pity to limit these essays just to the books themselves without addressing the legacy of the author and the ideas which we are now debating.

References

- Hall, P. (1998). *Cities in civilization*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Hirschman, A. O. (1958). *The strategy of economic development*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Jacobs, J. (1961). *The death and life of great American cities*. New York: Random House.
- Jacobs, J. (1969). *The economy of cities*. New York: Random House.
- Kaldor, N. (1985). *Economics without equilibrium* (Arthur M. Okun Memorial Lectures). New York: Sharpe.
- Marshall, A. (1890). *Principles of economics*. London: Macmillan.
- Massey, D. (1995). *Spatial divisions of labor: Social structures and the geography of production* (2nd Ed.). Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Myrdal, G. (1957). *Economic theory and underdeveloped regions*. London: Duckworth.
- Oinas, P., & Leppälä, S. (2013). Views on book reviews. *Regional Studies*, 47(10), 1785–1789. doi:10.1080/00343404.2013.856530
- Richardson, H. W. (1973). *Regional growth theory*. London: Macmillan.
- Shumpeter, J. A. (1943). *The theory of economic development: An inquiry into profits, capital, credit, interest, and the business cycle*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Walker, R. (2013). Why write books? *Regional Studies*, 47(9), 1607–1609. doi:10.1080/00343404.2013.843768