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A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR SHRINKING CITIES

J. Hollander

Edward Elgar. Cheltenham/Northampton, MA 2018. 144pp. ISBN 978 1 78536 632 1 (cased), ISBN 978 1 78536 633 8 (eBook)

This book is part of the Elgar Research Agenda book series, exploring possible future avenues of research in various topics. While most books in this series are edited volumes, Justin Hollander's book is a monograph. As one of



America's most prominent shrinking cities scholars, he is well positioned to introduce the topic, present an inventory of the state of the art and guide us in potential future research on shrinking cities.

Hollander starts off on a personal note, introducing us to how he discovered shrinking cities as an emerging and relevant research topic. He pays tribute to his former mentor Prof. Frank Popper, who (together with his wife) was one of the first in the US who dared to say that population decline does not have to be a bad thing. After presenting the essence of the meanwhile substantial literature about causes and effects of urban and regional shrinkage and possible policies and strategies to deal with shrinkage, Hollander has good reasons to state that "Studying the problems of growing cities is easy. (...) A veritable 'growth machine' of academics, scientists, and political leaders love to study the problems of growth, sprawl and related issues. No such army exists to support and reinforce the study of shrinking cities." (p. 17).

In the following chapters, Hollander makes clear that shrinkage should always be seen from a multi-scalar perspective, both in geographic and political-administrative dimensions of scale. Even if the actual shrinkage is limited to one city or even a part of a city, shrinking city researchers and policy-makers should always take its wider regional and national context into account to understand where shrinkage comes from, which effects it has and what could be done about it. At the same time, though, the impact of shrinkage can vary considerably between cities, suburbs and rural areas within the same region, and even between neighbourhoods. After discussing the regional dimension of shrinkage (demographic trends, urban-suburban-rural dynamics within city-regions), in the following chapters the scale shifts down to the local city and sub-city level (local policies, possible interventions at the neighbourhood level, and the specific challenges of declining downtowns). This is followed by thematic chapters about prominent sub-themes within shrinking city research: the debate about social justice and social equity, and what is "good" or "successful" planning in a shrinking city. Each of the chapters starts with a general introduction to the chapter theme, the main on-going debates and essential literature. Afterwards, some key research questions are introduced, the research methods most appropriate to answer those questions are presented (including not only commonly used methods, but also some proposals for innovative methodology), and a research considered "exemplary" is discussed more in-depth.

The book is written in an accessible and personal style. Throughout the book Hollander makes clear what personally fascinates him in shrinking cities research, and he also convincingly argues that despite urban shrinkage being put firmly on the academic and political agenda meanwhile, there is still much more research, policy advice and policy action needed. The "shrinking cities army" that he is still missing may be emerging after all, but many questions still remain to be answered and much more awareness of the challenges faced by shrinking cities should still be raised. The way this book is written (maybe also partly due to the format required in this Research Agenda book series) may have some drawbacks and limitations too, though. Although the literature reviews and the in-depth exemplary projects are not limited to North America only, Hollander generally keeps it 'close to home' and discusses literature and projects he is most familiar with and often also personally involved in. Europe and Japan get frequent attention in the book too, but the emphasis is mostly on North America and especially the US, which may make the book more attractive to a North American audience than to potential shrinking city researchers at other continents. This is emphasized in the conclusion chapter, which is a bit puzzling: is it really the conclusion of the book or introducing a new case study in a small shrinking US town? Moreover, the book's perspective is mainly "Global North," while also in the "Global South" many shrinking cities can be found. These cities may also learn from the "Global North" experiences, but they probably also face their own specific challenges differing from their Northern counterparts. This is unfortunately also a reflection of the general state of the international shrinking cities debate so far: despite several attempts to bridge continental divides, a cross-continental perspective on causes and effects of urban and regional shrinkage and appropriate responses to it remains to be developed.

The debates covered and research approaches advocated also reflect the author's personal stance in shrinking cities research. The author is aware of this, as he mentions at the end of the conclusion chapter (p. 129): "I purposefully designed this book around my own worldview and am advancing a research agenda that is people-centered, design-oriented, methodologically aggressive and experimental, eternally optimistic, and pragmatic." This is



something to be aware of when starting to read this book. Still, also for those with different worldviews or different preferences about how to analyze shrinking cities, this is a very welcome and timely publication that will definitely help to get more researchers interested in and involved in shrinking cities research.

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