

Interview with Sami Moisio



*Interview by Joan Fitzgerald, Editor-in-Chief, Regions and Cities Book Series
Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts, USA.*

How did this book - Geopolitics of the Knowledge-Based Economy come to be?

Sami Moisio: The basic idea started to grow 5-6 years ago when I recognized gap in geopolitical literature on knowledge intensive capitalism. I recognized that this form of economy is often discussed in terms of inter-state competition, nations' international competitiveness, and what successful states can do to survive in the purportedly "global" race for specific type of investment capital and talent. Knowledge-intensive capitalism thus seemed to be one of the important geopolitical subtexts of our time, effectively guiding policy-making across contexts.

Similarly, I recognized that "innovation scholars" had difficulties to see the role of politics in the context of knowledge-intensive capitalism: this economic form had been interestingly depoliticized or naturalized in innovation studies. In my

perspective, the knowledge-intensive capitalism was thus effectively separated from the issue of the political production of space, which for me is a key issue in understanding how what is often dubbed as the knowledge-based economy, knowledge-economy, new economy, cultural cognitive capitalism, or whatever you call it, is constituted in the first place. It is for this reason why I started to develop the concept of knowledge-based economization, which refers to knowledge-intensive capitalism as an ongoing political and societal process whereby a number of political issues become effectively economized.

One of the main tasks of the book is to analyze and conceptualize the ways in which the process of knowledge-based economization can be understood as a geopolitical process. In my usage, the geopolitical refers to the production of territories of wealth, power and belonging. One of my tactical goals was to demonstrate how these territories are produced in the seemingly relational world (often misleadingly dubbed as “gloeconomic”) of “hubs and flows”. I discuss, for instance, how global value chains (the world of firms) become one of the key geopolitical spaces of contemporary capitalism, spaces that states and other political seek to manipulate through acts of territorialization.

I ended up arguing that knowledge-based economization is realized in geopolitical discourses, in the practices that seek to bring about specific human subjects (the talented, the creatives), and in the objectifying calculative practices (such as competitiveness indices) that construe and reify cities, regions and states as units of fierce inter-spatial competition. In short, the knowledge-based economy has a lot to do with political entities, the strategic production of space, and it is therefore much more than a set of “economic” transactions.

You identify three views of the knowledge-based economy. What are the distinctions?

Sami Moisio: One of the goals of the book is to understand the coming together of the material and the discursive in the process of knowledge-based economization. It is for this reason why I loosely utilize the so called cultural political economy approach in the book. Set of ideas and wider discourses articulate what this economy is all about spatially and in other respects. But the process is also about the circulation and accumulation of capital. I re-read the text on “geopolitics of capitalism” by David Harvey in 1985 and wanted to associate my analysis at least implicitly with his treatment of the space economy of

capitalism, and the related question of how the world of production, built environment and higher education are all crucial dimensions of knowledge-based economization.

What is the distinction between the knowledge-based economy and society?

Sami Moisio: Actually, the original title of the book was Geopolitics of the knowledge-based society. But I soon realized that I was examining the ways in which economy was translated into society as cities, regions and states - for me an important geopolitical moment of territorialization.

In this context, it became important to realize that the process of knowledge-based economization is very city-centered and in so doing interestingly rearticulates state territories. Cities have gained also political weight in the process of knowledge-based economization. Major cities, in particular, are often considered as hubs in this kind of economy, and thus important strategic sites through which state's international competitiveness can be fostered. Cities thus become units of inter-state competition, and this highly divisive process highlights super star cities/national champion cities and particular segments of population (the talented, the creatives) living and working in these spaces. Thus, knowledge-based economization is very much connected to a kind of competition over attractiveness between cities and state, and thus to the associated politics that seeks to manage mobility of capital and particular labor in order to territorialize these in certain state territories. Quite often, dense urban spaces, and all kinds of "urban" spaces of innovation, are articulated as key sites in this attempt to manage mobility. In short, in the process of knowledge-based economization, cities emerge as innovation machines that are crucial for the political success of states, too. As such, the inter-state competition is urbanized.

Who is the audience for this book?

Sami Moisio: As a political geographer interested in political economy, I tried to reach several audiences. I tried to develop what I called "political geography of economic geographies" and in so doing bridge the wide gap between the economic and political geography. But I also knew that it would be difficult for "innovation scholars" to get/buy my points because they often operate epistemologically exactly in the depoliticized and naturalized world of economy

(measuring the success of this and that “innovation ecosystem” or “smart city”) that I sought to geopoliticize. But obviously I also wanted to write to the International Relations people who often make an analytically problematic distinction between the geoeconomic and the geopolitical, and who often take a narrow view of the geopolitical.

One interesting question in the future is whether the Silicon Valley world and the associated politics is somehow challenged at the moment by Trump, Brexit, and rise of nationalist forces in many geographical contexts. Nancy Fraser’s recent point regarding how the “progressive neoliberalism” inherent in the process of knowledge-based economization is evaporating is very interesting from the perspective of my book. We may be witnessing a rupture in the process of knowledge-based economization, and this requires more research.

On a political level, one of the challenges is to develop the knowledge-based economy as a more inclusive social and political formation - both spatially and with respect to different segments of population. In its current forms, the process of knowledge-based economization marginalizes many places and people, and in so doing produces a fertile ground for nationalist politics.