

Failed futures? Unmaterialised visions and their ambivalence in regional development



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Many regions have witnessed grandiose visions of their future, but the future that eventually unfolded proved less glamorous and, when measured against the high ambitions articulated by policymakers, rather disappointing. Still, past experiences do not seem to have made such grandiose visions less attractive. As of now, bright futures in fields such as artificial intelligence, semiconductors, or green industries are imagined for quite a few “left behind” regions. While interest in visions of the future is growing among economic geographers, such (often) exaggerated imagined futures are not yet well understood. This is why the new article in the “Policy Debates” section of “Regional Studies” asks how and why

such high-flying imagined regional futures are constructed and what it means if they fail.

Using the case of the peripheral city of Be'er Sheva in the Negev Desert (Israel), the article shows how policymakers pushed a vision of making the city a "cybersecurity capital" with global relevance. This vision was moulded into policies and investments, and it did attract several multinational corporations. However, when measured against the country's economically dominant Tel Aviv agglomeration, Be'er Sheva can hardly be understood as a worldwide "capital" for cybersecurity. Still, on some accounts, the city saw successes in regional economic development, some of them driven by a strong research university. Therefore, the case raises the issue of ambivalence: while grandiose visions might fail to materialise as they were imagined, this failure cannot be equated with failed regional development as successes might materialise in other, often unexpected ways.

What does the case tell us about regional policymaking in "left behind" regions such as Be'er Sheva, a city that has suffered from social marginalisation and a long-standing image of peripherality? On the one hand, imagining a bright future for a left behind region might serve to mobilise regional agents and unleash creativity and dynamism. In this way, grandiose visions can play an important role for policymakers wishing to overcome unattractive images of such regions (bearing in mind that such unattractive images do not necessarily have to correspond to reality). On the other hand, implementing such an imagined regional future is probably harder the more ambitious the vision was in the first place. If the vision fails to materialise, citizens might perceive their region as even more left behind and disregarded, and new disappointments might add to old ones. Particularly in regions which suffered from deindustrialisation in the past (which applies to a large number of left behind regions), feelings of disappointment might harden and diminish the credibility of policymakers and policies in the future.

For these reasons, the article calls for a humbler policy approach in imagining regional futures and anchoring those in the needs and contextual conditions of the region. This call is of high relevance in the current era, as many regions across Europe and the United States are being reimagined by policymakers as becoming reindustrialised, for instance, through large-scale investments in new semiconductor fabs or electric vehicle manufacturing plants. In these cases, it is

worth asking whether these schemes, even if they materialise, live up to the expectations and hopes raised or whether more than these grandiose visions of high-tech investment is needed in these regions to address the needs of their citizens.

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