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‘Place-Based Leadership: Reflections on Scale, Agency and Theory’

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In their article ‘Mobilising leadership in Cities and Regions’, Andrew Beer and Terry Clower lay down the gauntlet for Regional Studies, Regional Science scholars to engage with a fledgling sub-discipline - that of place-based leadership. In doing so, they make a number of claims. First, that current thinking in the field lacks analytical rigour and systematic inquiry. Second, that effective leadership is more important to the success of ‘place’ than ever before. Third, that there is a relationship between place-based leadership and economic development. Forth, governments have an important role in creating the right conditions under which leadership can emerge. On these summary points I wholeheartedly agree. However, in responding to their challenge for more focussed inquiry on place-based leadership I offer some reflections on the details of their analysis. In particular, I would like to explore further notions of scale, agency and theory.

Scale

Beer and Clower survey the literature on the leadership of regions, cities and communities. While this approach is a sensible starting point for examining sub-national leadership they go on to treat these different conceptions of space and place in a uniform manner. The terms ‘region’, ‘city’, ‘local’ and ‘community’ are used interchangeably throughout the article. This loose terminology dodges the difficult questions about the significance of scale. Arguably, more precision is required if we are to fully understand, theorize and operationalize models of leadership. The complexity of scale is compounded by the fact that, more broadly, these terms are used to describe very different phenomena depending on context. For example, in the United Kingdom (UK), Local Authorities are often bigger in terms of geography, population and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) than many regions on the European continent. Likewise, there are important distinctions to be made between ‘city regions’ that cross political administrative boundaries and ‘cities’. Moreover, scale raises questions about whether a global mega-city can be described as a ‘community’ or whether this term is reserved to describe neighbourhoods or localities. What is certain is that scale matters and the type of leadership enacted in a city compared to a rural community will be different. Beer and Clower acknowledge that leadership is enacted and experienced in different ways and that there is no single style of leadership for places. Nonetheless, the importance of scale and the need for robust terminology is perhaps too readily overlooked. There is a need to develop a theory of place-based leadership appropriate to *scale* (geography, population, GDP) and *type* (devolved/decentralised, urban/rural, City Mayor, Council Leader). Without this, findings will have limited resonance with scholars looking for precision or practitioners seeking ‘toolkits’.

Agency

There is undoubtedly a need for a greater understanding of where and by whom leadership is enacted. Beer and Clower call for a closer examination of the role of the individual - or agency - in the leadership of place. They recognise that leadership is enacted by politicians, professionals and state and non-state actors in different settings. More specifically, they note that ‘professional staff can serve as important catalysts for change at a community level’ (p. 18). Does this imply that professional staff *cannot* enact leadership and change at a city, regional or local level? This point reinforces my plea for precise terminology but also raises

questions about leadership, agency and scale. Who can enact leadership? How? At what scale and with what consequence? Davies (2013) reminds us that catalysts for change and innovation can happen at a small, individual level but can have a large impact on place and society. He turns to the concept of 'everyday making' to describe how individuals can enact change and contest the existing order just by 'doing things differently'. More specifically, everyday makers enact political action and resistance by changing small behaviours which might in turn have some cumulative impact on society. Lowndes and McCaughie (2013) reaffirm this observation in their study of local government responses to austerity in the UK. They noted a surprising lack of national leadership or big ideas about how to manage the crisis. Instead they observed coping strategies at a local and individual level in a bid to offset the negative effects of austerity. Their study showed that some public officials actually discovered a greater capacity for leadership, entrepreneurialism and innovation within the constraints of the crisis that ultimately served to shape their locality. These examples demonstrate that place-based leadership can be derived from different sources operating at multiple levels (Hambleton and Howard, 2013). Indeed, bottom-up creative responses should not be overlooked in shaping the leadership of place. Thinking about the scalability of agency and leadership is important - i.e. how micro-level activity from unexpected sources can have a cumulative impact on macro ideology and place.

Theory

Beer and Clower draw upon an eclectic mix of literatures and disciplines in their review of the leadership literature, including management, behavioural and collaborative approaches. In particular, they attached a great deal of emphasis on the importance on facilitative leadership, involving collaboration, power sharing and trust among multiple agencies. This is entirely appropriate in an increasingly globalised and multifaceted policy environment. These 'collaborative' concepts are, however, well-trodden in the literature on policy networks, which could prove a fruitful avenue for more considered theoretical reflection. A brief nod is made to Sotarauta (2010)'s description of 'policy networks' as the type of environment that place-based leaders need to negotiate. Indeed, much could be learned from a closer examination of the policy networks literature. For example, existing work has explored the role of agency in collaborative governance, including the characteristics and actions of 'boundary spanners' (Williams, 2002), 'network managers' (Kicket *et al*, 1997), 'policy entrepreneurs' (Beeson and Stone, 2013), 'reticulists' (Friend *et al*, 1974) and 'network brokers' (Sydow, 1998). In their article, Beer and Clower describe leadership as setting visions, implementing plans, instigating change, adjusting strategies and monitoring performance. Indeed, these are all features of network management (Klijn *et al*, 2010) and there is a wealth of literature that might be drawn upon to inform place-based leadership. The policy networks literature also includes a consideration of trust and personal relationships, inter-dependence, institutional features and process, meta-governance (creating the right environment for doing business), complexity and risk, leadership strategies and change and innovation. These are all concepts that Beer and Clower raise in their article, thus demonstrating the potential synergy between the literatures on place-based leadership and policy network theory.

There are a few areas that were not raised by Beer and Clower that are perhaps worthy of further exploration. First, Beer and Clower tend to focus on place-based leadership in pursuit of economic outcomes and little attention is given to democracy or civic engagement. However, active citizenship and social capital can have a significant impact on economic development and regeneration (Putnam, 1993). For example, Amin and Thrift's (1995) notion

of 'institutional thickness' draws on engaged and connected communities as a basis for economic productivity. Much work has been done in the policy networks literature to explore the link between governance, democracy and civil society (Sorensen and Torfing, 2007). Second, the role of the media and information and communication technology (ICT) does not feature. The increasing significance of the 'mediatised world' (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2012) and role of social media is hugely important for place-based leaders seeking to connect with their communities and locality. Again, work is emerging in the policy networks literature on this theme. Bringing together the literatures on policy network theory, leadership and territorial governance could assist the development of a more analytically rigorous approach in the field.

In conclusion, Beer and Clower offer an important and timely contribution to an increasingly important debate. It is not an article that seeks to present all the answers. Indeed, this field is in its infancy. Instead, it sets a vital marker - an invitation for Regional Studies, Regional Science scholars to engage with multiple disciplines and practitioners in the field to develop an understanding of leadership in context.

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