

Governing by Comparison: Competitive Upscaling and the Global City Imaginary

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This paper identifies and explains a paradox in contemporary US urban governance: at the same time that the global city policy model has spread to cities far down the urban hierarchy, it is increasingly not cities at all that are the face of this policy, but rather large multi-city and multi-region economic development partnerships. I argue that the political economic trend of urban growth coalition instability and the institutional/discursive trend of comparative urban governance and benchmarking have interacted in a precise way in the last two decades in the US: to produce a systematic drive toward “competitive upscaling” in both growth coalition formation and place marketing, the interactions between which have tended to be mutually reinforcing.

Drawing on comparative research of five case studies of “competitive multi-city regionalism” across the United States (the Arizona Sun Corridor Partnership, the Bluegrass Economic Advancement Movement in Kentucky, Florida’s Super Region, the Southeast Super Region Committee in Louisiana, and Team NEO in Ohio), I identify the “global city imaginaries” which have animated contemporary economic regionalism outside of actual global city sites by offering the prospect of territorial agglomeration to achieve the network power characteristic of global cities. I argue that this competitive upscaling has spread across the United States as an economic governance logic through a process of policy isomorphism and best practice development. But what begins as local attempts to leapfrog competitors through competitive upscaling ends up as a vicious circle that reproduces regulatory dysfunction—a competitiveness trap in urban economic policy at a new multi-city scale. I conclude by discussing the implications of the research for critical urban studies, suggesting that the discipline’s methodological cityism makes it difficult to theorize the increasingly complex socio-institutional forms mediating urbanization and globalization.

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