

Book review

The Handbook of Evolutionary Economic Geography

Edited by Ron Boschma and Ron Martin

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The Handbook of Evolutionary Economic Geography is a comprehensive collection of topics in the newly emerging paradigm of evolutionary economic geography. One immediate shortcoming of books like this size and scope is that this comprehensiveness can easily make the reader lose sight of the whole picture. However, here the editors have managed to steer a clear path that also keeps the reader engaged. The 24 papers included are grouped into five parts based on their common themes, which made it quite easy to find a specific topic of the reader's own interest.

The introduction, like those in any good collections, linked up the papers in this handbook by the basic ideas of an evolutionary thinking behind the wide scales of topics. According to Ron Boschma and Ron Martin, the aim of evolutionary economic geography is to understand *“the processes by which the economic landscape – the spatial organisation of economic production, circulation, exchange, distribution and consumption is transformed from within over time”* (p. 6-7, emphasized in its original form). So the potential contribution of evolutionary economic geography lies in bringing space into the historical discussion of economic activities. However, the students of the evolutionary economic geography are well warned of the difficulties in achieving this goal, let along the lack of a universally accepted literature of evolutionary economics to borrow from. Three strands of evolutionary thinking, in particular, are identified as of great potential to be built on, namely: the Generalized Darwinism; the Path Dependence Theory; and the Complexity Theory. For economic geographers who take history seriously, the task is thus can be understood as trying to find the channels through which the space can be incorporated in the above three models. However, a noticeable tendency in the literatures, as we read through the collection, is that too often the concept of ‘space’ has been reduced to a specified or the so-called ‘localized’ routine, network, or cluster of companies. Without a thorough discussion of to what level of

abstraction, and to what scales the core idea of space is relevant, this embryonic paradigm may face a difficulty in reaching a consensual standard of theorizing.

There are five parts in this book besides the introduction. Part one is concerned with the conceptual ideas of the evolutionary economics and how they can be fruitfully intergrade into the economic geography. This well organized theoretical effort can be read as a thread linking the whole collections and is a must read for any beginners in this strand of research. The two editors contributed to most of this part and a sense of critical questioning can be felt -- even though a general consensus has been reached on the rich potentials the evolutionary thinking can bring to the further development of economic geography. The four chapters in this part embarked on the discussion of the three key concepts in evolutionary economics respectively, and, although implicitly, the linkages between them. The generalized Darwinism is about the principles of variety, selection and retention (chapter 2), all of which are path dependent to varying degrees (chapter 3). Taken together, we have a complex system (chapter 4) with confined dynamics, powered by the interactions between different components (chapter 5).

Compared with part one, part two is more loosely organized under the theme of 'dynamic'. Various 'hot' topics, all of which have a long record in economic geography, have been organized vertically from the micro foundation of entrepreneurs and firms, up to the regional clusters and the innovation systems. Some inspiring arguments, however, are emerging by taking a standpoint of dynamic thinking. For example, chapter 6, 7 and 8 together provided a convincing logic as to why the produce, development, as well as diffusion of routines are locally biased. The importance of knowledge and learning took a central position in their arguments. At the scale of clusters, the basic argument in chapter 9 is that the well-

documented benefits of clustering should be attributed to its later stage instead of a precondition. Part three of this book is much more focused on networks of entrepreneurs and companies. The evolutionary economic geography has taken the network analysis one step further by emphasizing the temporal and spatial dimensions involved in the interactions of economic actors. Borrowing and improving the methodologies used in network analysis, the evolutionary economic geography has showed its potential to be the most powerful route of fusing both the qualitative and the quantitative methods. The shortcoming of part three, however, is that some authors have overestimated the readers' knowledge background and absorption capabilities by playing around with excessively sophisticated methodologies.

Part four is concerned with the institutional environment of economic actors. Compared with the so-called new economic geography and the traditional evolutionary economics, the evolutionary economic geography inherits the contemporary focus of economic geography on the intangible asset of a place from the very beginning. Unlike using simplified assumptions in the new economic geography, the evolutionary economic geography explicitly emphasizes on the tangible as well as intangible institutional factors. What is more, in contrast with the evolutionary economics, its advantage lies in that the institutional settings have been given an important spatial character. As the first 'comprehensive statements' (p. 4) in the still emerging field of evolutionary economic geography, it would have been worthwhile for this handbook to provide more space for the discussion of institutions. Despite this underplaying of institutional analysis, the qualities of the four articles included are without doubt. For example, Simone in chapter 19 proposed an interesting idea about 'path plasticity'. By jumping out of the dominant cogitation of 'path dependency', this idea has the potential of accounting for the paradoxical function of institution: sustaining dynamic within stabilization. Part five of the book was organized under the theme of 'structural change, agglomeration

externalities and regional branching'. It might seem like a little bit redundant, as the three papers included in this part are overlapped by the themes discussed in the previous four. However, chapter 22 and 23 are distinct from foregoing ones by their geographical definition of space instead of referring to the localized economic structures. Chapter 24, on the other hand, requires the readers a much more solid mathematic background to understand. So it is understandable for the editors to separate them in this way.

All in all, the 24 articles included in the Handbook of Evolutionary Economic Geography have a wide coverage of varying angles, all of which shed a light on this emerging paradigm from different aspects. While excellent in conceptual clarification and articulation but relatively weak in the empirical exploration – understandable given this school's embryonic nature - this book has definitely achieved its goal of 'playing a formative role in influencing the future research agenda in this area' (p. 4). It is therefore highly recommended to researchers who want to dip further in evolutionary economic geography or those who simply want to get an overall profile of its development.

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