

This is a pre-print version of the Book review Luca Grilli (2021) The innovation complex: cities, tech, and the new economy, *Regional Studies*, 55:2, 371-372, DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2020.1848876. The final authenticated version is available online in <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2020.1848876>.

The Innovation Complex

Cities, Tech, and the New Economy

Sharon Zukin

Oxford University Press, New York, United States of America (2020)

pp. 315 (xi + 304)

Hardback

U.S. \$29.95

ISBN: 9780190083830

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-innovation-complex-9780190083830>

The book fully describes what the author, Sharon Zukin, defines as an ‘innovation complex’: a nexus of relationships and transactions between different actors (e.g. individuals, private and public institutions, non-profit organizations), arising in New York (NY) mainly after the 2008 Great Recession, with the intent to facilitate innovative and entrepreneurial activities in the Big Apple and make the city a new global innovation hub. The book considers the different parts of the innovation complex and devotes a specific chapter to each one. Prof. Zukin deeply analyses each component’s nature and mission, the core activities by which they are characterized, and ultimately, the people which embody these different parts of the complex. Like pieces of a puzzle, all these components contribute to compose the final picture, i.e. the innovation complex, where each part is influenced by – and, in turn, influences – the other. Similar to a Russian doll, the author starts her analysis from the ‘smallest’ ones (i.e. hackathons and meetups), which are important to create the cultural *humus* which is deemed vital to feed the (fictional, in the author’s view) narrative on innovation and

entrepreneurship, to arrive at the largest dolls (i.e. the Brooklyn tech triangle), passing through the important role and function of accelerators and venture capitalists.

There are at least four things which can be greatly appreciated about the book. The first is that it is a 'honest' book, in the sense that the author is often critical of what she describes as the rhetoric about innovation and which is prefigured in a prologue chapter titled "Innovation: a trigger warning". Thus, as a reader, whether or not one agrees with the author's interpretations of events and facts (and I personally disagree with some of these), there is no subtle intention to convince the reader about them in the conclusion, treating those views as a logical consequence of the arguments made in the previous chapters (actually the book lacks a proper conclusion). Second, the book exemplifies what is generally meant by an 'entrepreneurial ecosystem'. Zukin uses this specific term rarely and prefers others, such as 'the innovation complex' of the title or the 'triple helix model' (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 1995). However, the detailed (sometimes too detailed, see below) examination of the interrelationships between different institutions and actors in a limited and bounded geographical area offers a concrete example of an entrepreneurial ecosystem, and why it is important to take it into consideration, at many levels – including the policy making level. Third, the book is also illuminating in showing the role played by the real estate industry in all these innovation dynamics. Most contemporary innovation is now *digital* in nature, yet sometimes we risk forgetting that this digital nature still needs physical space to be conceptualized and created. Zukin explains how the real estate industry has more than a say in all the innovation and entrepreneurial phenomena that the book analyses. Finally, methodologies, including ethnographic research and qualitative analyses, are rigorously described and, in this respect, the author (and collaborators) have also been able to arrange meetings and interviews with top professionals which are usually difficult to contact and engage. This is surely a real value-added of the book.

That said, the book also suffers from some limitations, or at least missed opportunities that would have improved an already valuable book. First of all, the study is really too New York-centric. In

principle, this is not problematic per se, but it becomes so when the author claims that the dynamics leading to the innovation complex in New York are very much the same in many other cities. Many visits to European and Asian cities are reported in the author's note at the end of the book, yet the idea that NY should be an emblematic (if not paradigmatic) case for these other realities requires a leap of faith for the reader. In fact, there is no attempt to draw similarities and parallels (or identify differences) between what is occurring in New York compared to other geographical contexts. Second, and relatedly, the book abounds in details about the role of individuals and institutions. On the one hand, this strengthens the robustness of the descriptive endeavour; but on the other hand, it makes it harder for an average reader (like me) to follow the discourse, and does not make the book a 'page-turner'. Third, the analysis appears to suffer from a theory deficit. In fact, there is no systematic use of theory in analysing these phenomena and, moreover, documented facts are not really inductively used to build new theory. In this respect, the book lacks in my view a sufficient anchorage in the scientific debate. In fact, with the exception of sociology that is the author's main domain, few are the references to other fields, which have long analysed innovation dynamics and surely might have enriched the analysis. As an example, apart from a brief passage on Joseph Schumpeter at the beginning of the book (where, by the way, only his *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* is cited and not the equally, or even more, appropriate in this context, *Theory of Economic Development*), Zukin never really draws on the conspicuous body of knowledge produced by the economics and management streams in innovation and entrepreneurship research.

To conclude, despite this narrower-than-necessary geographical focus and, to some extent, lens of investigation, I found the book particularly interesting for those scholars dealing with innovation and entrepreneurship in a rather quantitative manner; since it may help them to better comprehend the interesting stories behind innovative entrepreneurship, which too often risk being hidden by the 'cold' numbers of econometrics.

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