

History of Regional Science and the Regional Science Association International: The Beginnings and Early History by Walter Isard Springer-Verlag: Berlin-Heidelberg-New York, 2003, 263 pp., ISBN 3-540-00934-5 Euro and US\$ 49.95

Although I do not mean to be presumptuous or nasty, I think I will be one of the few readers to get something from this book. It is also possible that I will also be one of the few readers who read it.

Regional Science at least in Anglo-America is a state of decline. The flagship Regional Science department at Penn was closed in 1993, 14 years after Walter Isard, its first head, and founder of the Regional Science Association (RSA), left for Cornell University. Furthermore, traditional allies of regional science, the most important of which was economic geography, have increasingly deserted it. But that is now. In the past, especially during its heyday period from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, regional science was a robust, expanding, and vibrant field of inquiry. It drew money from non-profits like the Resources for the Future, Inc., as well as various branches of the US government including NASA, the Departments of Interior and Energy, and the Office of Naval Research. It proliferated internationally as well as any successful multinational corporation of the time, establishing branch plant associations in Europe in 1961, and in Asia in 1963. And from the beginning, and maybe even before the beginning, regional science enticed economic geographers, forging important linkages to the discipline. As Isard documents here, it was discussions at the early 1950s regional science meetings which Edward Ackerman, William Garrison, and Edward Ullman attended that inspired the analytical turn in economic geography such that for a time it became regional science's disciplinary twin.

Walter Isard's latest book with its nineteenth-century-style descriptive title consists mainly of materials from the Regional Science archives housed at Cornell. The materials reprinted include large numbers of programmes from annual regional science conferences held both in North America and elsewhere from 1954 to 1967, long lists of RSA members and participants including their home street addresses, and lengthy quotations from minutes of RSA meetings, early RSA newsletters, and letters from Isard's voluminous correspondence. As someone who used the RSA archives, and who is keenly interested in the RSA's history, I am glad to own this volume. But I cannot think of anyone else I know who would want to own it. The volume is really a scrapbook of the early history of regional science, with almost no interpretation other than an underlying triumphalism.

The opening and closing chapters provide some reflection on the "beginning and early history" of regional science, but even the conclusion follows earlier statements Isard made in an essay he previously published in 1960 (page 187). The opening chapter is new, though, and attempts to provide a wider historical context for the emergence of regional science, and on Isard himself as "an entrepreneurial personality," and "son of immigrant parents" (page 2). But the four factors he lists, and the one paragraph he devotes to each – "The decline of the British Empire," "The rise of Hitler," "The introduction and later widespread use of mathematics in economics," and "The Keynesian revolution" – is insufficient to satisfy. Peculiarly lacking in Isard's treatment given his ferocious propensity to theorise is any theory.

What I find so interesting in the materials gathered here is the portrayal of the nuts and bolts, the nitty gritty, of academic institution building through particular context-specific practices. In spite of what Isard says about the beneficent abstract powers of science, what you see here is the force of contingent concrete actions by particular individuals, the most important of whom is Isard. He is everywhere. The energy, dedication and ambition of the man is staggering. During the war years he translates German location theorists into English while working the graveyard shift in a Connecticut psychiatric hospital, by the late 1940s he begins to lobby for a new regionally economic focussed organization, by the early 1950s he undertakes an inordinate amount of travel and letter writing to further his proposed organization, and which finally culminates in the holding of the first RSA meeting in Detroit in December 1954. But this is only the beginning. Subsequently he works tirelessly for the establishment of a Regional Science Department (granted in 1958 at Penn), and then the international expansion of the RSA. He is in Hague in June 1960, Paris later that same month, Ballagio in July, Stockholm in August, and on and on and on (pages 134-35).

The point is that the RSA did not emerge from abstract scientific rationality but from the energy, hard work, and native ability of particular individuals of whom Isard was key. He more than anyone enrolled a set of heterogeneous resources, including people, texts, locations, buildings, and machines, into an initially expanding network, regional science, that was highly successful. Missing from this volume, however, is an explanation of its success, or any recognition of its more recent failure.

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