THE SOUTH AND REGIONAL SCIENCE: THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE (Presidential Address to the Southern Regional Science Association, April 19, 1997)

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I am deeply honored to have served as President of the Southern Regional Science Association (SRSA) and to follow the distinguished group of individuals who have held this position in the past, particularly my colleagues from Florida, Carol West and Ed Malecki. As a native Southerner, I am proud of my long standing association with the SRSA. The opportunity to serve as President and as Program Chair has led me to appreciate the commitment of SRSA members and the degree of collegiality within the Association. Our strength lies in members who support the annual meetings, the journal, and other activities of the association. The association is financially sound, *The Review of Regional Studies* continues to publish quality papers, and our meetings continue to improve each year.

In preparing for this assignment, I reviewed previous Presidential Addresses. Speakers have tended to focus on regional science as a disciplinary area or on the South as a region with considerable comment on the role of this association included in both cases. It appears that this is a time to reflect on who we are, where we are, what we do, and what we should be doing. In fact, as Isserman (1993) notes, " . . . with the exception of presidential addresses, regional scientists pay very little attention to such fundamental questions as what it is that they are really doing and whether they are doing what they claim to be doing or ought to be doing."

Following this tradition of reflection, I have chosen as my title *The South and Regional Science: The Gap Between Theory and Practice.* I will not attempt a critical review of earlier presentations; there is little in the way of new information to be added in a span of 15 to 20 minutes. Yet, at the same time, the three topics—the South, regional science, and the Southern Regional Science Association—represent our reason for being and all deserve comment.

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Little needs to be said about the association beyond my earlier remarks. I will comment briefly on the South as a region and on regional science and conclude with my observation on the gap between theory and practice. My intent is one of reflection, not so much on what we do, but on our ability to convert what we know about the South and about regional science into practical advice useful to policy makers throughout the region.

The South as a Region

The South continues to be a region of diversity and contrast. It is at least three different regions—Appalachia, the Piedmont, and the Coastal Plain—each still struggling in a different way with its unique history and its own peculiar institutional past (Billings, 1988; Wright, 1986). The contrasts are captured by Malecki (1995) in the title of his Presidential Address *Global Cities and Back Roads: Perspectives on the Southern Economy*, and in the title of Bill Schaffer's (1993) Fellows Address, *Stagnation, Decline and Development: A Trip Through the Southern Countryside.* In Malecki's words, it is contrasts between "global metropolis and rural backwater, between mill town and shining shopping malls . . ."

The global cities include Atlanta, Dallas, and Miami, and the South is home to emerging, or in some cases re-emerging, places like Birmingham, Charlotte, Nashville, and Orlando. Other bright spots throughout the South are the many small-medium size cities and towns that are evolving into regional trade centers, the places that got the discount stores, the hospitals, and the shopping malls, and these places are doing quite well as a result. One would also add the emergence of high-technology areas such as Florida's space coast; Huntsville, Alabama; and the Research Triangle area of North Carolina to the list of things that bode well for the region's future.

Not all is bleak across the Southern countryside, but there is another side to the South. This other South is implicit in the earlier cited titles by Malecki and Schaffer. It is described by Rosenfeld in his article *Tale of Two Souths* and treated at length in a number of studies with titles such as *After the Factories* (Rosenfeld, Bergman and Rubin, 1985) and *Halfway Home and a Long Way to Go* (Southern Growth Policies Board, 1988). These rather dismal pictures are confirmed, or perhaps explained, by studies looking specifically at human capital and education issues in the South (Goetz and Debertin, 1994; Mulkey, 1993; Beaulieu, 1989; Beaulieu and Mulkey, 1995).

As a region, the South compares unfavorably to other parts of the country with respect to human capital development, and the rural South lags even further behind, a disconcerting conclusion in an era in which the future depends, more than ever, on the quality of a region's human resources. It is perhaps, more than anything else, a story of missed opportunity. Hansen reminded us in the 1970's that the growth of manufacturing industries in the South, particularly the rural South, was transitory, and that the future of the South was tied to its success in addressing human capital deficiencies. Ashby notes that "Economic development cannot be bought, borrowed, stolen, or even given away. It must be accomplished beginning with the particular set of circumstances at hand." For the South, the state of the region's human capital seems to be the place to start.

Regional Science

As Malecki noted in his Presidential Address two years ago, there has been ample treatment of the status of regional science in this particular forum. One would include Hite's (1985) discussion of the Southern contribution to regional science; the treatment of theory and the need for empirical research by Ashby (1981), Johnson (1991), and Kort (1995); Isserman's (1993;1995) treatment of the past, present and future of regional science; and the earlier Presidential Address and Fellows Address by Miernyk (1976; 1982). Regional science has reached forty, and there has been ample soul searching. However, I am not comfortable with references to a *mid-life crisis* (Isserman, 1995) and the implicit assumption of death at eighty. I am more comfortable with the conclusion that regional science is alive and well and that we as regional scientists recognize, in the words of Harry Richardson (1995),

> that what is really important is the continued existence and vigor of a global regional science community that sustains its members by the exchange of intellectual ideas across disciplinary boundaries.
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> I could always go to a Regional Science meeting, find that 90-plus percent of the papers presented were of interest to me, and meet researchers from other disciplines whose techniques and research findings were comprehensible and often fascinating.

Richardson also notes that regional science has had a major influence on the research direction of many individuals who might not refer to themselves as regional scientists. I think this will continue to be the case. Within my own department at the University of Florida and my own discipline (agricultural economics), I can note several examples where the theories and methods of regional science are instructive. Faculty members are interested in problems with an inherent spatial (regional) component. I would include those interested in trade shifts and agricultural production in Florida, the Caribbean, and Central America as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement. I would also include those interested in the role of specific industries in sub-state areas and conflicts over land use, water use, wildlife habitat, aquifer recharge areas, and environmental quality. Further, any list certainly would include questions of economic development in the smaller, more open national economies of the Caribbean and Central America and questions of development in particular states within Mexico.

The point is that we as regional scientists have something to offer our colleagues in the parent disciplines, and, there are opportunities to teach and learn from those in other disciplines as well. Both the growing importance of the problem set amenable to regional analysis and the opportunities to cooperate with other disciplines should help ensure a bright future for regional scientists.

The Gap Between Theory and Practice

As for the gap between theory and practice, Isserman suggests that, "Regional scientists need to go outdoors more." This is consistent with Kort's admonition that we get back to basics and build the information base " . . . that we and policymakers desperately need to assess the state of our subnational economies." Knox also reminds us that our comparative advantage is " . . . the ability and interests to apply to real world problems the rigorous and sophisticated methods that can address issues of structural change." My suggestion of a gap between theory and practice is a similar one, not so much that our analysis is conducted indoors away from the light of real problems which affect real people, but that we have had less success in converting analytical knowledge into practical policy advice and application.

Economic development, in general, and rural development, in particular, stand out as examples of a sizable distance between what we know indoors and the practices of policy makers and economic developers outdoors. To be sure, we are far from having all the answers. Malecki (1995) reminds us that

> Overall, despite 40 years of regional science research, we still lack a full understanding of processes of regional growth and decline, one that can take into account the evolving structure of the global economy, international business cycles, and the changing role of the federal government.

Yet, we do know a great deal about the process of development. Numerous studies and reports stress the importance of developing the region's human resources and the futility of past industrialization practices based on low taxes, few government services, and relatively low wages. Further, as Malecki notes, we know that the concept of human capital extends beyond simple workforce skills to include an increase in the understanding of the difference between growth and development and skills that include entrepreneurial and management skills and community leadership skills that foster change.

In practice, however, it appears to me that most of the economic development activities across the South have changed very little. The focus remains, for the most part, on industry or business recruitment programs fueled with various types of subsidies designed to lure businesses. A recent article in *INC* (1996) referred to this practice as the new *Civil War*, although I'm not sure I would use the adjective new. The *INC* writer (Friedman) described this civil war as " . . . an irrational and wasteful dangling of business-recruitment subsidies by headline-hungry politicians and the local bureaucracies that serve them."

To bolster his argument, Friedman notes the price escalation in the race to attract auto plants: $11,000 per job in 1980, $50,000 per job in 1985, and a current price somewhere between $65,000 per job for BMW in South Carolina and $200,000 per job for Mercedes in Alabama. I have no idea how much one could add in the cost of numerous other subsidy schemes, plans offered to compete not only with other states but often with other communities within the same state. The emphasis may have changed some over the years—moving towards chip plants, major league sports teams, tourists, and retirees—and its not true for all states and all communities, but for the most part, the focus of economic development efforts is still on attracting business.

My hometown, located in Alachua County, Florida, offers a local example. There is an economic outreach group operating an active business recruitment program with a combination of public and private funding. There is a separate effort to attract tourism and convention business, and the county is part of a regional effort to convince tourists to forgo better-known attractions to the south and discover the "original" Florida. Also, in recent years, large delegations of local business and government leaders have visited Huntsville, Alabama; Austin, Texas; and the Research Triangle in North Carolina to learn the secrets of producing similar growth in the local area.

Are such efforts, those in my hometown and elsewhere, successful? What is the appropriate alternative? For a minute, let us suppose that my hometown had none of these programs, but that we could honestly say that we had the best public education system in the country. I wonder what would happen in terms of economic development? At best, we devote a lot of effort to programs with no clear indicators of success. At worst, conventional economic development programs distract attention and resources from efforts to create an environment within which truly local development flourishes.

Rural development offers another example of where there seems to be a gap between theory and practice, or perhaps it's a special case within the broader context of development policy. Rural development has been a matter of interest to policy makers for years and explicitly addressed in federal legislation as early as 1972. Yet, we still have no consistent rural development policy. What we do have is a history of programs oriented mostly to places and not people, programs that are largely ineffective, programs not anchored in a useful theoretical/conceptual foundation, and programs that spread available resources too thinly to make any real difference in any one place.

Within regional science we have talked about "people vs places" and "transition vs development" (Henry, Drabenstott, and Gibson, 1986). However, policy debates have not recognized rural development for what it is, an ongoing, never ending process of adjustment to internal and external change. As regional scientists, we can help policy makers understand the fundamental issues involved in rural development and the role of communities within systems of communities. We are well qualified to help prepare places and people to deal with change, but we can neither stop change nor put things back the way they were.

Within a similar context, it appears to me that regional scientists should devote more effort to issues of government size and efficiency. Political adjustments seem much slower than economic ones. In rural areas we have too many small units of government that are not well suited for today's problem sets. Government reorganization represents not so much a gap between theory and practice, but more of an opportunity for us to apply our skills to a new problem set. Perhaps there is also an opportunity to work with those in political science and institutional economics.

In summary, we know a lot about the South as a region and we know a lot about regional science, but when it comes to economic development, there is still a significant gap between what we know and what is practiced across the region. Malecki (1995) reminds us that it is through the activities of regional scientists, those in SRSA in particular, that we have the best chance of understanding the South, an area I believe to be a truly unique region. I would add that the input of regional scientists offers the best hope to develop coherent, realistic, and successful development programs.

I will end my remarks with the advice of others. For the good of the South, we should, as Knox (1987) suggests, spend more time analyzing strategies for economic restructuring—on understanding the difference between growth and development. We should continue the tradition of knowing our region noted by Hite (1985) even when, as Kort (1995) reminds us, it involves the messy task of collecting data. If we fail to do these things, a paper written forty years from now may quote Isserman (1995) and again note that " . . . regional scientists still work indoors with data for things they have never seen. In fact, they often work indoors making up data for things they have never seen."

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