

Reflections on Urban Research Programmes in the UK

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1. Introduction

Though the focus of this paper is on three more recent research programmes, the natural starting point for any discussion of the way in which organised urban research has developed in the UK - and its relationship with intellectual advance on the one hand and policy/practice on the other - is the mid-1960s when a first major urban research initiative, of a quite different kind, was launched. Hence the paper starts by looking back to this period and its legacy (section 1), before outlining the three programmes which followed in the 1980s and 1990s/subsequently (section 2), and presenting the (selective) reflections of a participant in all three¹ on key issues which they raise of wider relevance to urban research initiatives internationally (section 3).

The mid-1960s were significant for a couple of related developments: first, in 1965 the establishment by the government (following the Heyworth inquiry) of a Social Science Research Council (SSRC), as a main vehicle for the funding of project research² in this field; and then, in the following year, the joint founding by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government and the Ford Foundation of a Centre for Environmental Studies (CES), in response to concern among planning professionals that there was no similar council covering environmental subjects to meet the research needs of urban planners. These two developments both occurred early in the life of a very planning-oriented Labour government, and at a time when urban (as well as regional and national) planning was seen in very technocratic terms. Oddly enough, the first Chairman of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) was Michael Young, who had been with Peter Willmott one of the pioneers of urban community studies in Britain, while it was the SSRC which was eventually responsible for the major interdisciplinary programmes of British urban social science research over the last 25 years. Or rather it was the ESRC - the Economic and Social Research Council, as SSRC got relabelled by another Conservative government in the early 1980s with similar misgivings, about both the desirability and scientific character of 'social science', to those of its predecessors which had delayed SSRC's original establishment.

The CES had a dual role, both as a funder - principally of projects bid for by university staff, but also of conferences etc. - and through an in-house research programme carried out by its own research staff, who built up to around 25 by the

¹ The author is one of just four veterans (with Nick Buck, Martin Boddy and Keith Bassett) of all three of these programmes.

² SSRC's functions were rather broader than this implies, but a key point under the British 'dual funding' system is that the research time of established university staff is funded through the mainstream university funding system - increasingly in relation to department's 'assessed' research quality - rather than through research councils. SSRC/ESRC are thus primarily responsible for funding hiring of research staff on temporary contracts for specific projects/programmes, and (increasingly) for 'buying out' of the teaching time of permanent staff to work on (rather than simply direct) approved projects.

early 1970s. For the first five years majority funding came from Ford, but thereafter it was heavily dependent on money from the relevant central government department (the Department of the Environment, or DOE, from 1971). Its budget included both general and project grants, to which later was added an intermediate 'selective' category to develop particular lines of work expected to be of relevance to policy. This was one indirect reflection of increasing tensions in relations with the sponsoring department. One broad source of these involved serious misgivings at the CES end about an increasingly restrictive culture of government research funding during the 1980s, based on 'Rothschild' principles which sharply distinguished 'pure' from 'applied' research (with no recognition of intermediate categories of 'policy-relevant' research), and sought to apply a rigid customer-contractor relation to the latter. The other more specific factor was a tension between the government and CES (and consequentially between factions within CES, including one Director more sympathetic to the government position) over the development of a substantial element of 'critical' social research within the CES programme. This conflict led quite early on in the (more radically Conservative) Thatcher administration to the withdrawal of government funding and closure of CES, in 1980.

During its 14 year life CES was a very important element in the development of several different kinds of urban research, including:

1. systematic analytic methods of urban modelling, planning and (what became) socio-demographics – stimulated by programmes initiated in the early years when Alan Wilson was the key directorial figure³;
2. critical urban sociological and geographic analyses, developing particularly during the tenure of the second director, David Donnison, including organisation/sponsorship of the Urban Change and Conflict conferences from 1975 onwards; and
3. promotion of a much wider body of urban research by economists, particularly during the tenure of the third director, Christopher Foster, though developments such as an Urban Economics conference series started much earlier.

The actual range of research was always substantially broader than this suggests, however, with a range of objectives extending from 'developing an understanding of the social and economic workings of cities and regions', via 'developing indicators of problem areas' to 'developing methodologies of planning and design'. Perhaps as significant for the long run as the actual research was the cohort of urban researchers who were developed (to greater or lesser degrees) in CES, among them Richard Barras, Alan Evans, Michael Harloe, Doreen Massey, and Richard Webber and other well known urbanists.

After the demise of CES, sponsorship of urban social science research in the UK became more polarised, with ESRC as the dominant funder of academically-oriented projects, while government departments largely confined themselves to a customer

³ Formally he was deputy director, but on a full-time basis at a time when the actual directors was only employed part-time.

role, seeking contractors for quite clearly defined (and tightly timed) investigations directly linked to current policy issues and programme activity. – supplemented by occasional surveys of existing research (e.g. Fielding and Halford, 1990) and empirical reviews of urban performance (Parkinson et al., 2005). As far as government departments were concerned, this represented a distinct narrowing of ambitions, as compared with the situation even a few years earlier, when the Department of the Environment had launched a research programme aimed at providing ‘a deeper understanding, and basis of theory, on the forces at work within and upon the inner urban areas’ (DOE, 1977b, 1).

2. The Research Council Urban Programmes 1982-2002

Support for urban research by SSRC/ESRC has always taken several different forms, including:

- ‘responsive’ funding of *projects* submitted in regular open competition on topics devised by the applicants themselves;
- funding (over periods typically of 10 years) of named *research centres*, first a Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS) at Newcastle University, then the Centre for Housing Research and Urban Studies (CHRUS) at the University of Glasgow, and now a Centre for Neighbourhood Research based jointly in the universities of Bristol and Glasgow.
- three *research programmes* – on Inner Cities in Context (ICIC), the Changing Urban and Regional System (CURS) and Cities, Competitiveness and Cohesion (CCC)⁴ – each involving development of a programme framework, competitive bidding for projects by academic teams, and an appointed programme Director, with primary responsibility for promoting integration and dissemination.

Formal ESRC programmes are thus far from being the only means through which urban social science research has been sponsored in the UK. But they have represented the only deliberate way in which the community has set about promoting major academic research (of particular kinds) in this field. On this ground alone it is worth considering seriously how these programmes have actually functioned, their distinctive characteristics, what they have successfully achieved, and where more difficulties have been experienced in meeting their aspirations.

A starting point is to recognise important differences both in structure and in the context from which they emerged.

The Inner Cities in Context programme, operating between 1982 and 1985, emerged against the background of a strong policy focus on ‘inner city problems’ originally announced in a government White Paper (DOE, 1977a), and followed up by an SSRC

⁴ In addition to these there were at least two other SSRC/ESRC programmes with a significant urban dimension to them: on Central-Local (government) Relations; and on Social Change and Economic Life (SCLEI).

Inner Cities Working Party, of leading urbanists, backed up by a small research team. Their remit was to provide an introductory review of what was known about ‘the problem of the inner city in its temporal, spatial, socio-economic and policy context’, and then develop a programme of original research to be commissioned by SSRC. The final report, drafted by Peter Hall (1981) - which drew on some international comparisons – usefully questioned the suggestion that there was a specifically ‘inner city problem’ and proposed a research programme involving:

‘comparative study of some local urban economies, carefully chosen to range from the depressed and deprived to the thriving and prosperous; its aim would be to understand in detail the forces that bring decline to one city, and growth to another (including looking) at the less problematic places, to understand why they should be that way and to ask whether the problematic places could hope to emulate them (pp 7-8).

Four major themes were proposed for these studies: structural change and the local economy; adjustment to the local labour market; the relationship between formal and informal economies and policy evaluation.

The actual programme which followed - though involving only two members of this working party – did actually follow the agenda quite closely. The core of the programme involved four city-based studies, each corresponding to one of the suggested categories of areas – three provincial cities which were respectively buoyant (Bristol), undergoing structural decline (Glasgow), and in transition (Birmingham), together with a London study including cases of both more and less successful inner areas. None of these studies really addressed questions about the informal economy, or engaged in formal policy evaluation – though a fifth area study, involving another city undergoing structural decline (Newcastle⁵) was added with separate funding by the DOE with the specific aim of investigating the impacts and effectiveness of measures (from all agencies, central and local) involving direct financial assistance to industry in the area.

To these five city studies were added a number of modest cross-cutting investigations of particular topics aspects of the research agenda in more depth across the full range of British cities. The main published output from the programme took the form of a series of books from a single publisher covering the separate studies⁶ – though a planned ‘collective volume’ by the teams/Director and the Director’s ‘overview volume’ failed to appear. Briefer summaries, however, highlighted three sets of finding:

Demonstration that ‘structural change is having profound effects on the British urban system, urban economies, and labour markets, and on the geographic and social distribution of employment opportunities’;

⁵ With this addition the area case studies effectively covered four of the six large conurbations in Britain plus one medium sized free-standing city – the actual coverage reflecting the identity of the successful bidders among the academic teams submitting proposals for the programme.

⁶ The published books were Hausner (ed.) (1986, 1987a and b), Boddy et al (1986), Buck et al (1986), Lever and Moore (eds.) (1986), Spencer et al. (1986) and Robinson et al. (1987).

Identification of ‘significant limitations on current policies to address effectively both the economic adjustment problems of urban regions and the employment needs of disadvantaged urban residents’; and
Suggestion of ‘a number of the policy elements of a more effective approach to these problems’ (Hausner 1987b).

By contrast with this consciously policy-relevant programme, the **Changing Urban and Regional System** programme, which closely followed it (running from 1985-1987) had entirely academic antecedents. These stemmed primarily from a version of the ‘restructuring thesis’ developed by Massey (1984)⁷ in which localities played a key role, and some wider moves to ‘put space back in’ analyses of social relations, often linked to an espousal of theoretical or critical realism (Gregory and Urry, 1984). There *was* a significant political context, in the experience since 1979 of rapid industrial job loss and sharply rising unemployment in the UK, under a Conservative central government strongly resistant to interventionist industrial policies or the saving of ‘lame ducks’ – thus stimulating interest on the Left in the ‘powers’ that localities might possess to pursue alternative forms of restructuring. Unsurprisingly then the CURS programme also took the form of a set of area (or ‘locality’) based studies, this time in seven areas which were mostly outside the conurbations, selected (at least partly) on the basis of a typology of structural characteristics⁸. These locality studies (all actually in England) were backed up by a smaller contextual analysis of change across the UK urban system.

The published output from this programme was rather more modest than from the ICIC programme, and produced even fewer general findings – though that might perhaps be rationalised as appropriate to an emphasis on the path-dependence (or, in realist terms, contingency) of developments in particular places.

The third programme, given the title **Cities: Competitiveness and Cohesion** – to which ‘governance’ would probably have been added but for another current programme on that theme – emerged more than a decade later, and only after lobbying by a group of senior urban researchers (with active support from the DOE social research director), stimulated in part by the fact that absence of a British programme was inhibiting participation in European collaborative work⁹. Also important, however, was a sense that the dynamic of cities was changing, with a new sense of the positive relevance of urban assets for economic competitiveness. This was highlighted in the preliminary consultancy which Ash Amin undertook for ESRC to develop the brief for the programme - with arguments about the ‘rediscovery’ of the city as ‘powerhouse of the globalized economy’ and the heterogeneous mix of economic, social, cultural and institutional assets on which contemporary urban

⁷ Partly during a period on an ESRC Fellowship after the closure of CES.

⁸ This criterion was not determinant, both because there was again a competitive element, with academic teams putting forward proposals for a wider array of places, and because the original framework involved a 6 by 6 matrix of locality types (Cooke 1986), only a small minority of which could be covered.

⁹ Notably potential interaction with the French interdisciplinary PIR-Ville programme and participation in the subsequent ESF ‘Civitas’ network.

studies depends that are reflected in Amin and Graham's subsequent (1997) paper). These ideas were only partially represented in the actual programme specification (which gave twice as much space to 'policy considerations' as to 'scientific concerns', though this did start from a clear statement that the late 1970s consensus around 'the Inner-City decline thesis, no longer serves British urban research and policy well' (ESRC, 1996, 1).

This programme was substantially larger than its predecessors in terms of resources, and the number of distinct projects and researchers involved (reflecting a general growth in the scale of ESRC programmes since the early 1980s. The total budget from ESRC was about £3 million¹⁰, with an extra £0.3 million contributed by DOE's successor, largely for dissemination purposes. There were 23 major projects: 19 of which addressed specific thematic issues – ranging from studies of differential patterns of economic change, and innovation clusters, via analyses of exclusion and inclusion processes in the inner city to investigations of urban leadership and the impact of voluntary organisations on social capital – while 4 larger 'integrated city studies' were charged with examining how key economic, social, political and (it was hoped) environmental processes interacted in specific urban regions (specifically London, Bristol, Manchester-Liverpool and Glasgow-Edinburgh). Though the programme specification had given just about as much weight to environmental quality as to social cohesion (in terms of factors potentially linked with economic performance¹¹) none of the projects actually gave significant attention to this theme.

Efforts were made to integrate this large and diverse array of projects via half-yearly conventions, linked to cross-project symposia and working groups, though the fact that these were not linked to specific publication targets, and represented competing demands for the time of research teams with no slack in their budgets, limited the synergies achieved from these. Uniquely the programme was involved in an extended series of briefing seminars with those involved in producing the new Labour government's *Urban White Paper* – though, despite an accompanying publication on 'the state of the cities' and a legacy of joint seminar series, it is hard to see what real impact the programme had on the contents of the White Paper. .

The most visible outputs of the programme in publication terms so far include three books from specific projects (Buck et al., 2002; Boddy, 2003; Butler, 2003); two from intermediate outputs (Begg, 2002; Simmie, 2001); a volume of summary essays on all projects (Boddy and Parkinson, 2004) and another relating research results to a rethinking of the core ideas of the programme about the 'urban triangle' of competitiveness, cohesion and governance (Buck et al., 2005). The last of these comes closest to representing a synthesis of findings, though it makes clear that (what its editors take as) the key task of clarifying and then testing implicit assumptions of the 'new conventional wisdom' was only partially accomplished within the programme.

¹⁰ About 4 times as large in real terms as the budget for ICIC.

¹¹ Perhaps because two other research councils were getting involved in issues of urban sustainability.

3. Some Issues Raised by Experience of These Programmes

The Advantages of the Programme Format

The ‘programme’ format for funded research – involving commitment of resources to a topic area over a fixed period, with an identified agenda, and some arrangements for interaction and/or collective dissemination of findings – has a number of rationales. These undoubtedly include funding agencies’ desire for a more active and purposive role, a stronger sense of self-identity and a higher public profile (with relevant publics including their ultimate funders). One might also expect a higher quality of projects (in terms of design at least), since rejection rates have tended to be markedly higher for project bids to ESRC programmes than for bids to the regular, open ‘responsive mode’ competitions. A plausible reason is that busy people are stimulated by a deadline (and maybe the desire to be part of a particular piece of ‘action’ in their field) actually to get proposals completed that might otherwise have been endlessly deferred. Of course, it is also possible that the privileging of a topic and announcement of a set of questions or themes encourages applications for ‘relevant’ work, with less self-censorship of ideas that are actually not very original or intellectually ‘important’. And, that might help to explain the apparent fact that projects in programmes (or at least those in the urban programmes) yield few radical breakthroughs, and possibly less than responsive mode research – for example the ESRC evaluation of the latest, CCC programme recorded just one Excellent rating of a project alongside 19 Goods¹². Maybe what are generally regarded as ‘breakthroughs’ in a social science or urban studies context more often occur outside the context of conventional research projects where principal investigators may be too heavily committed to the routines of carrying through an empirical ‘normal science’ investigation to make that kind of contribution. And, maybe, the value of innovations in theory or fashion is over-rated, relative to the more labour-intensive and intellectually ‘messier’ business of empirical investigation, theory-testing/operationalisation and application to concrete situations, personal experiences and operational choices. But, in any case, formal programmes don’t seem to be where the more radical developments generally occur – whether for better or for worse.

Inter-disciplinarity

The ‘initiative’ mode of research council support (including both centres and programmes) in the UK clearly seeks to promote interdisciplinary work – whether at the project level or across projects. This is both as a counterbalance to the mono-disciplinary bias that the structure of university departments and careers brings to the ‘responsive mode’, and because the quest for greater relevance and applicability typically throws up subjects which do not seem to fall neatly within the bounds of single social science disciplines. The urban research programmes clearly exemplify this. The ICIC programme represented a relatively narrow instance, where the frame of reference was largely focused on urban ‘economies’, and policies/institutions to manage these. But interdisciplinarity was much more central to the later programmes (CURS and CCC) which increasingly framed ‘locality’ and the ‘urban’ in terms of the interaction between processes (political, economic, social etc.) each traditionally

¹² And, by implication, three Poores: source ESRC (2004).

‘owned’ by different disciplines – though in each case the ‘urban’ sub-discipline tended to occupy a rather marginal position. The obvious exception to the last observation would be human geography, which in many ways has seemed to function as an interdiscipline, though one with a shifting centre of intellectual fashion, which only briefly (around the time of the launch of CURS) coincided with the urban agenda.

The evaluation report on the latest (CCC) programme records a very wide range of disciplinary involvement in its projects (at least as far as the social sciences were concerned) but also notes that few participants were drawn in from outside the ranks of existing ‘urban’ specialists (ESRC, 2004). Most of these, it could be added, tend to concentrate on applied work and thus be less strongly identified with central issues in their discipline. A possibly illuminating example is that the latest (CCC) programme involved none of the economists closely involved with the burgeoning field of empirical work inspired by the Fujita-Krugman-Venables ‘New Economic Geography’. This may be because there are few incentives for such specialists to seek support in programme mode – which imposes substantial overheads in terms of expected participation in interactive/disseminating activities, and where applied urbanists may have a competitive advantage (not least in displaying an interdisciplinary capacity). But it does seem to mean that such programmes tend to lose out on opportunities for stimulating and exploiting serious interdisciplinary dialogue.

The Area Focus

The main common element of the three ESRC ‘urban’ programmes was their use of area-based case studies – as virtually the whole of ICIC and CURS, and the ‘cornerstone’ of CCC (though only accounting for a third of its budget). In each case this went rather beyond the conventional social scientific recourse to ‘bite-sized’ local studies as a manageable means of addressing cross-cutting relationships and handling those kinds of qualitative material that have to be interpreted in relation to a specific context – though this was, of course, a factor. In different ways each programme involved some hypotheses about the potential importance of differences in the way that various processes operated in specific places. This was least advanced in ICIC, where the concern was predominantly with identifying factors that made some cities (or parts of cities) function more successfully in social/economic/institutional terms than others, and most central to CURS where the Massey thesis gave as much attention to how localities were ‘made’ (through a sequence of economic roles) as to the effects that they had (in securing particular new/old roles). In CCC, though the focus was on three concepts of apparently general significance (i.e. competitiveness, cohesion and governance), the brief’s emphasis on ‘integrative city studies’ exploring linkages across these ‘in the context of a single location’ and preferably longitudinally (ESRC, 1996, 13) also encouraged the telling of, analytically informed, stories about quite particular places.

This emphasis on local case studies marked an interesting return swing of the pendulum for British urban research in which ‘community studies’ had figured very strongly around the 1950s, before coming in for increasing criticism both for their

lack of theory and for their tendency to perpetuate a (rather conservative) myth/ideology of 'community'. And, despite the example of *Monopolville* (Castells and Godard, 1974):

'the arrival in Britain of critical urban studies in the mid-1970s was then marked by a turning away from broadly based local case studies. For ten years or so, there was in effect a divide between more theoretical analyses of urban political economy on the one hand and grass roots studies of specific local social movements on the other' (Gordon and Low, 1988, 7).

From my perspective, the subsequent swing back to 'locality' studies focusing on the interaction of different kinds of process in particular places with distinctive histories to them – in a more theorised version and with a much stronger awareness of external connections – was one of the most positive features of the CURS and CCC programmes, particularly since such studies would probably not get funded in other ways. Criticisms of how they were pursued followed the CURS programme, but it is notable that some kind of area-focused case study element has become conventional in British urban research even when 'locality' is not the focus.

The experience with more ambitious area-based studies in the CURS and CCC programmes did, however, point up a couple of important practical problems. The first is that the kind of agenda for such studies inherited from Massey is indeed ambitious, requiring combination of a wide mixture of methodologies implemented on a multi-level basis – with *intensive* neighbourhood level work set within more *extensive* city-region level analyses - questioning of many different kinds of actor, and some historical depth. In my judgement the CURS programme was simply not adequately resourced to successfully deliver on these aspirations (though CCC came closer). The second is that it has proved extremely hard to find a market for the kind of wide-ranging, book-length, area-focused publication which is the natural product of this kind of research. Clearly there are exceptions, but it seems really hard to sell serious academic books about places, unless those places are particularly 'glamorous' and/or one dimension of their story is substantially over-sold. If that is really the case – and not just a prejudice among publishers – the most likely reason is that in our role as teacher/consumers (rather than researcher/producers) rather few of us seem to think that a place-focused approach is really suitable for our courses and students. Many of us might prescribe particular extracts from such studies as partners for more conceptual material on particular issues – but generally without reference to the contextual material to which the locality approach attaches such weight. Without suitable outlets for extended in-depth writing, there is a real danger of area-based studies falling between two stools – too place-bound to carry much in the way of conceptual innovation, and too thin to convey any real understanding of the complex ways in which processes interact on the ground – and offering what may seem only rather superficial, time-bound descriptions of how things are.

Comparison

One reasonable expectation of programmes involving multiple area-based case studies is that (directly or indirectly) they will provide comparative evidence as a basis for testing or developing more general hypotheses – whether about common processes or

(more concretely) what one might expect to find in some other (unstudied) areas - and/or drawing practical lessons about actions to improve outcomes of one kind or another. Something of this kind was clearly envisaged in developing the ICIC brief, with ideas about learning lessons for less successful areas from the experience of those which were doing better. Neither of the later programmes had such simple or straightforward expectations of what could be learned from comparison of a few, diverse cases. But within every programme there were co-ordinating efforts aimed at promoting comparison or comparability of some kind – though with very limited effect. This ‘failure’ has several explanations, of which the most obvious is that each area study was actually undertaken by a separate locally-based team, with fortuitously different combinations of skills/expertise and disciplinary/theoretical affiliations, competing for position partly on the strength of the originality of their prospective approaches in relation to their nominated areas, and without any contractual obligation to work within a common framework (whether pre-defined or to be negotiated).

But there are also issues about what comparability ought to mean in this context, whether as a matter of:

- collecting common area-related data, though this may not actually be very useful when the number of cases is few, and many data are readily available already for much larger numbers of areas¹³;
- analysing parallels and significant differences in the way that specific processes operate in different contexts, and seeking out (locally taken-for-granted) factors which could account for these differences; or
- constructing/recovering broader narratives about the development and histories of particular places, with a view to understanding key differentiating elements, both in terms of objective experience, and the way that stories are told in relation to specific places.

Within programmes much of the talk about securing comparability has focused heavily on the first of these – admittedly the simplest, but one which, for many kinds of data can be as effectively undertaken outside the context of area-based studies. Some context-setting work with such data would be (and has been) a valuable complement to area-based studies, pointing toward what actually needs explanation in terms of more complex interactions of local factors. But the real value of area studies clearly lies in teasing out these more complex relations and/or in integrating qualitative with quantitative analyses. It is also these that effectively require (separate) locally-based teams, which is one of the factors interfering with comparability. The number of area case studies to be involved is also an issue, since I would argue (from the experience of the Fainstein et al (1992) *Divided Cities* study) that pursuing effective comparisons on a broad basis, and at a level above simply establishing differences in structure, outcomes and trends, involves a close and

¹³ An interestingly successful example of this approach was the ESRC’s Social Change and Economic Life Initiative (SCELI) , operating in parallel with CURS, which though not primarily ‘about’ place, successfully used a number of local labour market areas as contexts for collection/analysis of individual and establishment-based data using consistent nationally defined research instruments (Gallie, 199?).

extended engagement between the teams involved which is very hard to achieve with more than two or three cases.

The Missing International Dimension

Though the ICIC's preliminary literature review paid explicit attention to international experience (if predominantly that of the US), the only international dimension to the actual programme was provided by a small 'cross-cutting' project reviewing the employment/unemployment performance of cities in Britain, the USA and Germany (Wolman, 1987). In the CURS programme it was really little more than odd inspirational references to the 'power' of locality in the Third Italy. In CCC, the brief included an explicit statement that:

'international comparisons aimed at shedding light on the UK experience will form a vital part of the Programme' (ESRC, 1996, 15),

with encouragement for projects to build in provision for linking with overseas experts, and the intention to involve international collaborators in Programme activities. For one reason and another (including budgetary constraints and turnover in Directors) very little of this occurred, and what did seem to have only involved links with US scholars - notably with Susan Fainstein who undertook a review for the programme of relationships between cohesion and competitiveness (partly published as Fainstein, 2001). And just two of the projects had a significant international dimension - one involving a comparative study with continental researchers across four European cities; and the other statistical analyses using a pooled urban data set for three European countries.

4. Conclusion

It is hard to see the British urban research councils of the last 25 years as key to any theoretical breakthroughs in urban studies, or as having really shaped the direction of subsequent urban research (though it is actually too soon to judge in relation to the last of these). Substantial impacts on policy thinking are also hard to identify, and it is not evident that any have played the same role in bringing a cohort of new scholars into the field that CES was able to achieve with its more sustained funding. However, some real importance can be claimed for them in: reasserting the importance of systematic empirical work of all kinds to developing worthwhile/useable understandings of how cities function and shape the lives of those operating there; repeatedly showing the inadequacy of the one-dimensional understandings on which government policies have tended to rest (and that there are no easy options); sustaining the thesis that economic, social and political processes need to be considered together in an urban context; and developing approaches to city-based studies which effectively exemplify the issues which these interactions present in practice. Beyond this, we would argue that their experience - in terms of limitations as well as achievements - can offer important insights into key issues related to interdisciplinarity, locality-focus, comparison and developing an international dimension for other social science-based urban research programmes.

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