

Whose Tech? Whose City?

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Abstract

In response to reviews of *The Innovation Complex: Cities, Tech, and the New Economy*, the author emphasizes that every “new” economy, including the “innovation” economy connected to high-tech industries, depends on building local, spatially and socially embedded ecosystems that are not only regional districts or clusters of related producers, but social constructions of discursive, organizational, and geographical spaces. A rich case study of a single, local, tech ecosystem reveals a multidimensional “innovation complex” that represents the planetary urbanization of the Silicon Valley model.

Keywords: Innovation; urban economy; urban tech economy; innovation complex; entrepreneurship and innovation.

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An author's dream is to find attentive readers, and my dream comes true in the careful readings and profound critiques of my book, *The Innovation Complex* (Zukin, 2020), by Patrick Le Galès (2022), Giovanni Semi (2022), and Silke Steets (2022). Thanks to all three and to Marco Solaroli for bringing us together.

I appreciate that these readers accept the basic premise of my work: production systems are socially embedded in localities. Whether we look at the history of the automobile industry in Torino and Detroit, or the high-tech industry in Silicon Valley and Shenzhen, we find a nearly universal set of manufacturing techniques and management strategies shaped by distinctive assemblages of cultural practices, political forces, and organizational resources. These are both enabled and constrained by space and time; production systems are local, and they change.

Except for Manuel Castells's formative description of the electronics industry of northern California as an "innovation milieu" (1989), sociologists do not often think about this foundational framework. They leave "space" to geographers and regional economists — notably, for the contemporary tech production system, to Michael Storper (1995; Storper et al., 2015), AnnaLee Saxenian (1996), and Martin Kenney (2000) — who have explored the tacit knowledge, political alliances, and strategic choices that support the rise of innovative economies like Silicon Valley's. But we have all felt the effects of the tech industry's spatial strategies during the past few years. While the covid-19 pandemic swept through global supply chains and local populations, we communicated by Zoom and TikTok, and tech companies abruptly abandoned their physical locations to work remotely.

My book focuses on the emergence of "Entrepreneurship and innovation" as a meme of tech-connected economic growth in the time before the pandemic. In the decade following the 2008 financial crisis, the *implanting* of the tech industry created new visions of growth for cities and towns all over the world. The dramatic expansion of capital investment in tech firms, and the equally dramatic emergence of startups as the charismatic core of the contemporary economy, spurred energetic campaigns by local elected officials and business communities to become "tech hubs." Partly they realized that the revolution was going to be digitized, and every place had to jump on the bandwagon for its economic survival. Partly, too, cities' embrace of the tech industry reflected the relative ease and lower cost of founding software startups and the greater mobility of app developers. But the "planetary urbanization" of the Silicon Valley model also represented a decision by many tech companies to access the cultural creativity, economic diversity, and large labor pool that cities offer. When Amazon held its infamous contest to find a city or town to house its North American "HQ2," which drew entries from more than 200 localities, it showed how eager both sides were to make a deal. As usual, though, a Big Tech company held the advantage, which was revealed when protests in New York derailed that city's deal making.

As Patrick Le Galès (2022) astutely notes, the Amazon episode is an important key to my interpretation of the urban tech economy that took shape after 2008. Whether we call it an ecosystem, as tech people do, or a growth machine, as urban sociologists may prefer, the urban tech economy is remarkably complex. It differs from the early postindustrial economy that it replaced, yet it is interdependent with preexisting, "legacy" business sectors, especially finance and media. It is desired but also, in many ways, constrained by local politicians who need to satisfy their various constituencies, most significantly, by finding new sources of jobs. This is not only New York's issue. All tech economies are based on the "triple helix," as the sociologist Henry Etzkowitz (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1995) cleverly named it, a growth coalition of business, government, and local universities, joining together to feed their own entrepreneurial ambitions. Because the major goal of urban economies is the production of space, the triple he-

lix of the urban tech economy develops spatial forms of mutual benefit with the powerful, local real estate industry. Around 2010, coworking spaces emerged as one of those forms. In the next few years, a broader “innovation complex” developed as the urban tech economy’s dominant spatial form. And this happened not only in New York, but in every city that could mobilize public-private-nonprofit partnerships around the discourse of “Entrepreneurship and innovation.”

How does this happen? What strategic choices are made? Who makes these choices, and who benefits from them? These are the questions my book asks. But first, it is necessary to describe a specific place where you can see, hear, and feel the process.

The beauty of a good case study is that it offers enough thick description to inform and convince readers. But it must also suggest that these specific conditions are generally true, inspiring readers to fill in, reject, and revise the template according to their own discoveries. This is what I try to do by describing the tech economy that developed in New York after 2008 and modeling it as an “innovation complex,” a set of discursive, organizational, and geographical spaces that define the urban tech economy in the early 21st century. My readers’ job is to test the model. How does the triple helix growth coalition work in other places? Do any local governments succeed in controlling Airbnb, Uber, and Amazon? Can any city resist the tech industry’s seductive power?

I am trying to expand the range of urban political economy — and urban sociology — by showing how the cultural forms of a “new” economy are created by many people making individual decisions and acting on many different stages, and by emphasizing the ideological power of economic, especially tech, discourse. I was inspired at the outset by Nigel Thrift’s (2005) perceptive writing about the “new” economy that was already heavily influenced by a charismatic startup culture and, as Patrick Le Galès (2022) notes, by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello’s (1999) important analysis of the “new” spirit of capitalism that developed in the late 20th century. What speaks to me in these works is their emphasis on intangible, cultural, and even emotional factors in capitalism’s hold on its modern subjects. This encouraged me to emphasize, as Silke Steets (2022) says, *l’imaginaire* of innovation, which I describe in the motivational speeches given at tech meetups, the “flow” of time-pressured coding at overnight hackathons, and the attraction of the cultural figure of the startup founder — an *imaginaire* intended, as Giovanni Semi (2022) implies, to captivate a highly skilled IT work force and “manufacture” their consent. If Boltanski and Chiapello can find “capitalism” in France, I am not to blame for finding the “innovation complex” in New York.

It is slightly ironic that I have become known for my books on New York. I was trained as a comparativist, published my first book, before *Loft Living* (Zukin, 1982), on ideology and everyday life in the former Yugoslavia, and have written about industrial policy and regional restructuring in France. All that research laid the groundwork for my “American” book *Landscapes of Power* (Zukin, 1991), which features a spectrum of cities undergoing deindustrialization and postindustrial transformation, “from Detroit to Disney World,” as the book’s subtitle says.

More recently, I developed a transnational, comparative study of globalization and gentrification on local shopping streets in six big cities: New York, Toronto, Amsterdam, Berlin, Tokyo, and Shanghai. I was one of the field researchers in New York and Amsterdam, and I walked and spoke with business owners on all twelve research sites. But, because I deeply believe the best writing is done by researchers who really know a place (and speak the local language), this book has three co-editors and sixteen authors (Zukin et al., 2016). It’s another way to use the singular case study to illuminate multiple scales of lived experience and social

structure.

The Innovation Complex, for better or worse, is all mine. It is not a theoretical treatise for those who already know a great deal about tech ecosystems; neither is it a new theory of capitalism. Instead, the book dissects the anatomy of one tech ecosystem and offers a cross-section of one form of capitalism as it is practiced today. What I learned from interviews, ethnography, and exhaustive immersion in podcasts and blogs is organized in a series of chapters on very specific, nested spaces: from tech hackathons, meetups, and accelerators to venture capital offices, the Brooklyn waterfront, and citywide pipelines to tech jobs, including the academic capitalists known as universities. Although this is a book about New York, it's about all cities, too. New York is not a "typical" city; which city is? But if the innovation complex really is a hegemonic model of the urban tech economy, the best way to see it is from a front-row seat.

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