



PLACES RATED ALMANACS AND 'ROLL OUT' NEOLIBERALISM: 25 YEARS OF GUIDING WHERE TO LIVE IN THE US

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ABSTRACT

For a quarter of a century, comparative rankings produced in the *Places Rated Almanac* have offered to help people find their 'best' place to live, spawned a mini industry, and provided a benchmark for the evolution of rankings of modern communities in North America and around the world. This paper examines the context of their emergence, their success, and also their limitations in the prediction of patterns of migration within the United States. In particular the paper addresses whether as an entrepreneurial product created in the spaces arising from the roll back of the national state and the foregrounding of the local, competitive marketplace it continues to have relevance in the new era of neoliberalisation. We argue that with greater but different emphasis on quality of life in the embedding communities through deeper forms of neoliberalisation there is continuing utility of such place ratings.

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MEETING A NEED: ITS NEOLIBERAL CREDENTIALS

A quarter of a century ago the *Places Rated Almanac* (PRA) was in many respects a birthchild of the neoliberal heyday of the early 1980s. Although it was founded on a long-established tradition of social indicators research and quality of life studies (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Gerhmann, 1978; Rogerson et al, 1989), Boyer and Savageau's creation owed its success to the eliding of circumstances and opportunities which arose in the era of roll-back neoliberalism and its associated wave of entrepreneurialism in America.

First, the publication of the first edition of PRA in 1981 coincided with growing awareness of the rise of place-based competition which was encouraging flows of human as well as financial capital. Many accounts have been written about this shift (Aglietta, 1979; Harvey, 1989a; Storper and Scott, 1992) and there is no requirement to reiterate these here. In essence, within the US, the switch from nationally, centrally driven Fordist-Keynesian regulatory management of uneven development, policies towards more market-oriented, neoliberal economic policies radically and vigorously targeted the movements of private capital as the primary tool of economic development. The result was considerable attention being directed towards the ways in which sub-national or meso-level places could begin to compete with each other. Rather than being the product of political negotiation and public largesse, this new economic development regime opened the door for cities and their associated new forms of growth coalitions, to begin exploiting their differential characteristics in order to compete for private sector investment (Harvey, 1989b; Cox and Mair, 1988) and within a high level of national and federal fiscal stringency compete for the (limited) state revenues. Through this shift to more locally determined neoliberal economic era, a more meaningful geographical unit of analysis had to be deployed in the analysis of competitiveness (Levine et al, 1989; Wish, 1986); one that recognised that "without the [local] extra-firm infrastructure, enterprises seeking to become entrepreneurial firms will likely pursue a 'go it alone' strategy and be at a competitive disadvantage in the international arena" (Best, 1990: 21).

Second, the PRA exploited the expanding provision of much richer geographical data at more localised scales, opening up possibilities for more sophisticated analysis of living conditions below state level than had previously been undertaken in social indicators research. The 1970 US National Census had offered much richer data at the standard metropolitan statistical areas (SMSA) scale and as Liu's (1976) pioneering statistical analysis of the 'quality of living conditions in metropolitan areas' showed, pointed to strong differences existing between the (then) 243 SMSAs. Boyer and Savageau took the data analysis to a new level, drawing on the expanding sets of local data – on factors as diverse as the number of libraries, to education attainment levels, and crime reports - which were being published often by national agencies to augment the demographic and econometric measures of the Census. Further, in the PRA they not only listed such locally derived data on each of the separate dimensions of a place's attractiveness but derived a cumulative index of what they termed 'quality of life'.

Third, the success of the PRA was in no small part due to the entrepreneurship of the publisher, Rand McNally. From its origins in the 1870s, Rand McNally had been a cartographic innovator, associated with the expanding reach of railways and the early movement of people across the US. This (then) family run firm expanded in the late 1970s, moving out of downtown Chicago to Skokie on its northern outer ring, and seeking new markets beyond the traditional core of textbooks and atlases. PRA was symptomatic of the diversifying and entrepreneurial environment of publishing. For Rand McNally, PRA fitted the bill of a new generation guidebook, capable of merging academic, popular, interesting ‘facts’ about places with traditional guides of where to go and how to get there. Rand McNally, however, proved to be quite typical of the neoliberal bubble of the 1980s and 1990s, with the family selling the business to a group of private investors from New York. Subsequently, the company lost its way, finally filing for bankruptcy in 2003, to be resuscitated with a new acquisitions company as majority owner. Later PRAs were to be published by IDG, itself a global technology and digital data media company which had grown in the same period of entrepreneurialism.

The *Places Rated Almanac* also capitalised on the very criticisms which were made of it as its popularity inevitably brought it to wider scrutiny. Amongst those first raising a critique were geographers, including Robert Pierce at SUNY who in his presentation at the American Association of Geographers (AAG) conference in Washington in 1984, and subsequently in print (Pierce, 1984), re-analysed the 1981 PRA data, applying a differential weighting to each indicator on the basis of rankings provided by a sample survey, thus creating an alternative ranking of places. Susan Cutter (1985), drawing on the earlier study by Campbell et al (1976) and Andrews and Withey (1976) also argued that Boyer and Savageau had overlooked well-being components which were meaningful to individuals and failed to include perceptual indicators of quality of life. Such criticism had the effect of raising further the profile of the PRA, and in a classic case of synchronicity, occurred just as the second edition with its new rankings of SMSAs and MSAs was being published.

Shaping a global market

While each guide has been controversial, as rankings inevitably are, none of the criticisms of the various PRA guides managed to slow the juggernaut of their commercial success. The 1981 edition, despite being arguably the first serious attempt in the USA to popularise a statistical ranking of communities and their quality of life, had within 12 months been reprinted four times. Similarly the 1985 edition was reprinted three times within a year. While the latest editions – the *Places Rated Almanac, Millennium Edition* in 2000 (Savageau and D’Agostino, 2000) and the special (5th) edition of the *Retirement Places Rated* in 2004 (Savageau, 2004) – have not sold as many copies as the original versions, they remain bestsellers. Whether the target audience was the average American family looking for a change of scenery or more specialised groups such as economic developers or retirees in search of their place in the sun, David Savageau and his co-authors have succeeded in publishing a series of best-selling guides to hundreds of communities across North America. The PRA has become part of the standard toolkit of economic developers and community promoters.

Although the immediate impact of the Almanac was most acute within the USA, both within and outside of the academy, the ripples of the PRA reached further a field. In fact, since their first edition was published in 1981, they have been

responsible for a veritable niche industry, providing not only a relative barometer on the evolution of American communities but also stimulating many competing and complementary ratings by other commercial and academic organisations in North America and around the world. In Britain, for example, the high ranking of Pittsburgh in the PRA inspired one local regeneration organisation, Glasgow Action, to commission a team of geography researchers to conduct a similar analysis of quality of life data for British cities (Rogerson et al, 1989b; Findlay et al., 1988). Drawing on the critique by Pierce of the unweighted aspects of community comparisons, and in an attempt to merge perceptual and ‘objective’ measures together, this team rated the largest urban settlements in the UK using national survey responses on people’s priorities in defining their quality of life, and widening the range of indicators to measure more relevant dimensions of a place’s character.

Others outside of academe also saw an opportunity in ranking places – with commercial organisations such as Mercer Human Resource Consulting (2006) now producing rankings of international cities, and the annual European Cities Monitor publishing rankings of European cities in terms of quality of life alongside the more economic-focused place ratings (such as KPMG’s Competitive Alternatives, 2006). Indeed since the late 1980s in the USA and the mid 1990s in Western Europe, the feeding of place-based competition through community rankings had become a major industry with regular guides being published on where to find the best and worst places for living, eating, working, dating, loafing, listening to music, and many other things - culminating in the publication in the UK of *Crap Towns* (Jordison and Kieran, 2003).

Emerging unscathed

The PRA challenged traditional economic thinking that only companies competed, with communities, and the entire public sector for that matter, consigned to minor supporting roles. Communities were considered part of a firm’s *comparative advantage*, like access to resources or labour, but did not of themselves compete. As late as 1991 when Michael Porter produced his national competitiveness strategy for the Canadian government (Porter, 1991) this assumption still had considerable currency. Yet even then the transition from nationally-based industrial economies to knowledge-based economies with global reach was well underway. As knowledge became increasingly the primary competitive resource in world economic activity, the source of knowledge, people, has become the focus of economic development and the generation of firm *competitive advantage*. Accordingly, the recognition of the hard to duplicate *regional advantage* (Saxenian, 1994) has pushed communities to the forefront of the competitiveness debate.

Today it is widely accepted that communities compete with each other on taxation and regulation, on infrastructure and transportation, on quality of life, on the all important issues of the attraction, retention and development of human capital, as well as on the more familiar firm decisions investment and access to financial capital (Harvey, 1978; Tremblay and Tremblay, 2006). In turn those overseeing the governance of these communities have aggressively adopted and used ratings as such the PRA as indicators both of their particular *regional advantage* and of their success in marketing themselves in the global market for talent, jobs, and investment.

Revisiting these early critiques of PRA it is perhaps surprising that the Almanac survived. Almost every aspect of the first two editions was condemned – from the choice of the metropolitan assessment unit and the confusion it generated

about the PRA as overly focused on cities, through the selection of categories which often defined quality and character of place rather than its quality of life, to the indicators employed to measure these categories. And, of course, there was also the process of comparison weightings – all were subjected to prolonged debates. Furthermore, the Almanac was the subject of much public feedback -- vested criticism (or praise) from local authorities, city officials, local media and many others whose jobs were linked their community's reputation. The PRA rankings either confirmed (for which it was praised) or belied (for which it was criticized) what people already believed.

This paper does not churn over the already substantial literature on the specific measures employed in such rankings (Sawicki and Flynn, 1996; Rogerson, 1997; 1999; Tremblay, 2004), the issue of employing ratings across different communities (Bell, 1985; Polèse & Tremblay, 2005), or argue the merits of specific rankings. Instead, this paper takes the opportunity to reflect on whether there is still continuing currency of such comparative rankings. As such, we ask whether the PRA is adaptable to the changing political economic contexts in the US. First, and recognising that the ratings have not been constructed on a static basis, we outline some of the adaptations which have been made between the different editions of PRAs. But we suggest that beyond such change, there are other issues which are challenging the continuing value of ratings of metropolitan on the basis of quality of life – including more selective emphasis on specific individuals and groups within a knowledge economy; the shift from leveraging in new human capital to the enhancing of place attachment; and the shift from an urban regional scale to that of community. Prior to exploring each of these, and working with the terms of reference of the PRA, we examine the extent to the ratings can be said to make a difference in appreciating past patterns of movement in the US.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE?

In contrast to the UK where place based ratings have fallen by the wayside, in the US there remains strong interest in them. Why? One explanation might be that in the USA there is a long history of decentralisation of economic development functions to local and regional levels (Cox, 2004). Over 11,000 local and state authorities¹ are thus thrust into intense competition with each other to secure public and private investment, enlarge their workforces, and attract top-rated talent. While many of these communities are relatively small several, some, like New York and Los Angeles, are among the world's largest economies. This highly competitive and uneven environment provides the backdrop for the inter-place competitions that continually emerge between local growth coalitions and community development associations that typically form to promote an area.

The ultimate test for any place rating exercise is whether it has the capacity to either shape or reflect the patterns of location decision making. The value of PRA for “comparison shopping” has long been recognised (Myers, 1987) but befitting its synergism with the neoliberal notions of place competitiveness and the attraction of human capital, the primary audience for PRAs remains potential re-locators. As the authors of PRA have themselves acknowledged, the publication is viewed as an information source to assist potential migrants to identify new pastures. It implicitly encourages mobility – it is essentially a clarion call to ‘greener pastures’ for those who are considering or those who may be tempted to consider relocation.

Reflecting migration?

This remains a large market. Migration data from the US 2000 Census records that during the previous 5 year period, 46% of residents were estimated to have moved (ie changed their place of residence (home) on the two dates). Of course there are very individual explanations associated with each of these moves of more than 120 million people, but if the PRA is to be a useful guide it arguably should reflect the broad trends that can be observed as to why some places are more attractive to re-locators – and conversely, why some places remain relatively unattractive - and those locales from which people are more likely to move.

To what extent do the PRA ratings correlate with actual patterns of movement? We explore this by comparing the PRA rankings of places with US Census data of movements into and out of MSAs – a smaller cohort of the total movers mentioned above. Between 1995 and 2000, more than 29,710,000 people moved into the 330 MSAs in the US. At the same time and reflecting the long-term trend of migration to smaller settlements and non-metropolitan areas, this immigration was exceeded by more than 841,000 of leaving these same areas. Comparing the overall ratings for each MSA in the 2000 PRA edition with net migration for each MSA as recorded from the US Census for the period 1995-2000, there is only a weak correlation (**Appendix A: Table 1**).

Between 1995 and 2000, in the US, 6 MSAs experienced more than 10% net growth from migration, and only one, Grant Fork Junction, had a net decline of greater than 10%. As **Table 1** shows amongst those places with the largest percentage of population increase, few rated highly in the overall PRA index and net-migration itself offers little indicative value of the PRA rating. Indeed, of the 30 MSAs with the highest percentage net migration gain (cf 2000 population levels) only 2 are rated in the top places in PRA (Raleigh, Phoenix) and only a further 2 are in the top 30 ratings.

It should be noted that many of these top 30 places with the highest net migration are also sunbelt destinations for snowbirds, such as Naples, Myrtle Beach and Fort Myers. These are destinations that receive large numbers of temporary residents from many locations in North America and elsewhere during the winter months.

Acknowledging that net migration obscures more detailed and intimate insights to people's movement – both in terms of individuals and in terms of the relationship between gross migration flows and population stocks (Galle et al, 1993) – a further comparison can be made between the 2000 overall PRA ratings with number of in-migrants to each MSA (**Appendix A: Table 2**). On this measure of *attracting migrants* there is a stronger correlation (0.379) between the PRA place ratings and the actual number of people who relocated to these places. Of the 30 places with the highest levels of absolute in-migration, 14 are also rated in the top 30 places overall for Quality of Life, including 7 of the top 10 places. Together these 30 places account for 25.9% of all in-migration to metropolitan areas and a further 21.6% were relocating to the next top 30 places. The top 100 places account for 70% of all in-migration to metropolitan areas. For comparison, only 3% of in-migrants were attracted to the lowest 30 places in the PRA rating!

Traditional notions of migration emphasise the significance of employment opportunities and labour as a key, if not the most important, motivation behind individual and household moving decisions. The PRA index on jobs places emphasis

on the creation of new jobs and the level of earnings attached to these and records Phoenix-Mesa, AZ as the top place.

Comparing the PRA Job Index with the absolute number of in-migrants, there is a more positive correlation (0.461). **Table 3 (Appendix A)** illustrates this for the top 30 places ranked on the PRA Job Index. Of these only Minneapolis and Nashville are not in the top 50 MSAs in terms of number of people attracted as in-migrants. These 30 communities account for 31% of all in-migration. The attractiveness of these places is further reinforced by their accounting for only 7% of all the out-migration from MSAs between 1995 and 2000.

Given the multifarious factors which shape the complex decisions to relocate, and the multidirectional flows of migrants, no simple statistical correlation of the above types can be used to predict mobility flows perfectly. On the one hand, the above analyses highlight that there is some evidence to suggest that at least amongst the top rated places, PRA ratings can be viewed as predictors of a community's attractiveness. Nevertheless, there remain a significant number of places that have received a low rating for quality of life while still attracting large number of in-migrants, and some places that were rated highly on quality of life but which attracted far fewer than average new migrants.

BEYOND THE 'GENERAL MIGRATION TEST'

But perhaps there are deeper issues here – ones that at least raise questions about the continuing success and relevance of the PRA. This focuses on whether the 'test' of relevance should be around general migration. Whilst such a validity measure may have been appropriate in the 1980s, when place competitiveness was about alluring substantial 'new' external capital (human and other) into a place, the current political economic agenda on place competitiveness has changed. It does so in two key respects – the attraction of specific talent to places, and the retention and use of human capital in communities to enhance their quality of life/quality of place. Second, there is an issue of whether the PRA style of place assessment can be sufficiently adaptable to accommodate changes in the political economic contexts in the US. We turn to consider these in the remainder of the paper, arguing that despite some changes to the PRA over the last 25 years, there are more fundamental ways in which it might need to adapt to retain its currency.

ADAPTING TO NEED?

Despite criticism, the PRA has remained true to its early credentials. Its basic formula has not altered much over two and a half decades, with the Almanac evolving only subtly in its assessment of place attractiveness. Certainly, new indicators have been added to the index; new US MSAs were included as they became part of the US Census Bureau's data base; the scoring system refined; and considerably more local detail on each MSA included, but the formula and its underlying conception has not altered.

That said, one strategic changes came in the 1997 edition when Savageau and Loftus first began including several Canadian cities in their ratings enabling them to

lay claim to the identification of “North America’s best all-around metro areas” (p1). In widening the scope to include Canada, it certainly created new challenges for the authors as the metropolitan areas were defined differently in each country in terms of population thresholds, population density, and the spatial size with respect to the sub-units contained within them. Other comparative studies have also stressed that despite some similarities there are distinct features which separated the US and Canada in terms of quality of life and urban liveability (Bourne, 1999; Mercer and England, 2000; Zolnik, 2004),

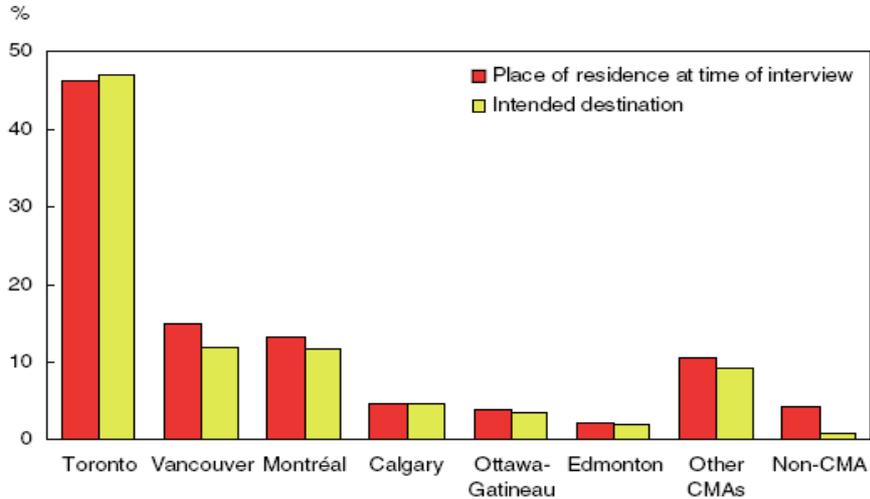
Was there more to this than creating a wider commercial market for the Almanac? First, such comparisons align well with the concept of a ‘North American city’; arising from an ongoing convergence of Canadian and US economic interests under NAFTA (Lipset, 1990; Garber and Imbroscio, 1996). Those protagonists with a continental perspective argue that the forces of technology, economic and cultural globalisation have created a transnational urban system where the primacy of the differences between Canadian and US cities are being replaced with the primacy of their commonalities. For instance, in Canada or the US worker and firm mobility seem governed by many of the same constituent elements of regional advantage leading to a minimization of national differences. They suggest that counterarguments have tended to focus on historically engrained differences of culture and attitudes, and declining differences in municipal level powers (Ewing, 1992; Zolnik, 2004).

Second, given the enhanced worker mobility across the US-Canada border, US cities are increasingly in competition with Canadian cities to attract both firms and human capital. Indeed, Canadian cities have been more successful in offering the quality of place and quality of life than US metropolitan regions. Working from the narrow sector of the creative industries as a base, Florida (2005) has argued that Canadian communities have “quickly repositioned themselves from industrial to creative economy regions” (p172) such that they were “poised to compete with the leading US creative centres” (p172). According to Florida, Canada is becoming a ‘global talent magnet’ (p238).

Thirdly, attitudinal surveys point to a high degree of perceived permeability of the national frontier in the search for a higher quality of life. In a 2001 survey (Maclean’s, 2001) 25% of Canadians suggested they would move to the United States if given the opportunity, and more recently the Pew Research Centre’s *Global Attitudes Report (2005)*, suggests favourable attitudes towards the U.S. have continued to slip in Canada -- 59% had a positive view of the U.S. in 2005, down from 72% in 2002. By contrast, U.S. attitudes toward Canada remained positive, with 76% of Americans holding a favorable view of Canada. Whilst such attitudes are shaped by foreign policies (the declining view of the US has become more pronounced since the Iraq invasion in 2003), it is perhaps with the internal policies of the US towards immigrants, temporary workers, and international students, that one might better understand this change.

The ‘magnetism’ of Canadian communities may be more a matter of decreased American openness. That said, many of these new temporary Canadian residents may stay and become part of new talent clusters (even as they did in Silicon Valley in the 1990s) and conceivably begin generating the very ‘magnetism’ Florida has described. In Canada six major cities attract the bulk of Canadian immigrants, with one city, Toronto, attracting almost half of all immigrants to urban areas.

Figure 1: Canadian immigrants' intended destination before immigration and their place of residence at time of interview, by selected census metropolitan areas, 2001



Source: Statistics Canada, 2003

Although the inclusion of major Canadian cities in the PRA may have some academic logic, and indeed some of the permeability associated with a (little) more global sense of American residency, in reality migration across the national border remains limited. The net effect of migration across the US-Canadian border was 12,616 in 2005 in favour of the US. Canadian immigration to the US in 2005 was 21,878, a level not seen since 2001 having declined by half in the intervening years (Office of Homeland Security, 2005). According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2006), 9,262 immigrants came to Canada from the US, almost doubling the level from 2001. This flow represents a little under 4% of Canada's total immigration, and the two way flow is less than recorded between many US states in the US.

Perhaps more significant for the PRA is the limited scope offered by the including only US and Canadian cities. With increasingly global population movements – including an average of 1.13 million foreign born people who moved to the USA annually between 1990-2000 (Migration Information Source) and an estimated 3 million people who leave the US each year (Tolson, 2008) – the focus on a nationally bounded set of places for comparison is open to question (Sassen, 2002). With the growth of international and global comparative rankings of urban attractiveness, the question arises as to whether the PRA has become overly parochial and spatially limited in relation to mobility patterns of Americans?

RETAINING CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE

In other respects, there are more challenging dimensions to the future of PRA-style rankings. These reflect key shifts in the wider political economic context and the ways in which place competition has evolved. The traditional growth machine models have increasingly been challenged over who might be attracted and the purposes of such local growth coalitions.

Attracting talent

Associated with shifts to an increasingly information-based economy, the question of quality of life for whom also needs addressing from the perspective of

what drives local competitiveness in a global economy. In an industrially-based economy there exists a fair degree inter-changeability among workforce members. One family doctor or civil engineer might be pretty much the same as another. In a knowledge-based economy this is not the case. In fact, whole industry sub-sectors can emerge or fail on the basis of the presence of a single worker with extremely specialized skills and knowledge. Thus while a certain quality of life may be desirable for attracting large number of local residents, if it is not desirable for a specific individual or key groups of individuals, the local economy can fail to evolve or remain globally competitive, producing generalized reductions in everyone's socio, economic, and cultural quality of life.

Some commentators have argued strongly that consequently the very human capital being sought to make places competitive has altered, with greater emphasis being placed on specific forms of 'talent' and, in the process, localities need to be assessed in terms of different forms of comparative, competitive advantage. The holistic notions of quality of life have been replaced with emphasis on the more culturally-specific, bohemian lifestyle which assists in "drawing the spheres of innovation (technological creativity), business (economic creativity) and culture (artistic and cultural creativity) into one another, in more intimate and more powerful combinations than ever" (Florida, 2002, 101).

Richard Florida, perhaps the strongest proponent of the revised focus on specific 'talent', argues that in an increasing knowledge based economy, the fortunes of places rests on the capacity to attract and retain a class of 'creatives' and in the pursuit of this group specific place attributes are critical in achieving the balance of technology, talent and tolerance required in the age of creativity (Florida, 2002). Although this clarion call for a new approach to urban competitiveness has resonated with urban policymakers in many parts of the USA and indeed globally, it has also been subjected to sustained critique. The details of this barrage of criticism is beyond the scope of this paper, but it has focused not only on the rankings of SMSAs produced by Florida in his assessment of what he class 'quality of place' but also amongst others the explanatory power of the data, the definition of creativity, the social consequences of his new 'class' divisions, and the extant neoliberal development agendas (Peck, 2005; Marcuse, 2003; Sawicki, 2003 for reviews of Florida (2002), see also Florida (2005) for his response).

For the analysis here, what is significant is that Florida argues that those attributes of places which make then desirable for this creative class is more narrowly focused than those which PRA see as significant for the American population more generally. The resultant ranking of SMSAs in terms of the 'Creativity Index' is thus argued to be a more contemporarily relevant assessment of success in 'attracting' human capital.

In applying these different assessments of quality of place, there seem to be few areas of agreement between Florida's Creative Class Index of and the quality of life ratings of the PRA (**Appendix A: Table 4**). Of the 276 MSAs included in the rankings by Florida, only 11 also appear in the top 30 places in the PRA and 6 places are separated by over 100 positions! However, the correlation between the top 30 in the Creative Class Index and the PRA index = 0.477 suggesting a reasonably strong connection between the two indices, despite the obvious differences.

Again the lack of strong correlations is unsurprising given the differences in approach. What Florida's research has done is to underline the inclusive dimensions of the Places Rated Almanac. Instead of a 'bohemian index' or a 'talent index', the PRA offers those critics of the effusive Floridian notions of what constitutes a successful place with solid indicators and quantifiable attributes of place which tend to be more recognizable as key elements of community priorities and shared concerns. On the other hand, the Floridian approach has challenged the traditional notions of social classes and associated utilitarian categorisations of society (by age, socio-economic status etc).

Place attachment

At its heart, however, the Floridian approach continues to focus on elites - creative entrepreneurs - whose attraction is central place growth and competitiveness. It is grounded in a particular notion of neoliberal agendas for local state and communities of the traditional growth coalition; albeit one focused on technology, talent and tolerance.

Increasingly however, under different forms of neoliberalist regulation in the US (and elsewhere), alternative forms of local based engagement is being formulated. Under these, greater emphasis to build stronger sense of attachment to place. This is in sharp contrast to the weakening of place ties evident in the 'roll back' neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell, 2002) when government encouraged people 'to get on their bikes' as a solution to problems in their lives and communities. Whilst the PRA spoke to this earlier agenda, the Almanac too resonates with this local engagement strategy of the new neoliberal policy arena.

Further whether expressed through the Third Way of Clinton or the more neo-conservatist approach of Bush, the political slant of roll out neoliberalism has reinforced the importance of the social aspects of place over the economic ones. As Peck and Tickell (2003) express it, one element of this evolved form of neoliberalism has been its focus on "the 'downstream' consequences of economic liberalisation – such as crime and social exclusion".

In pursuing local urban and regional policies which give renewed importance to tackling such dystopian anxieties associated with 'community' (Sennett, 2003; Baeten, 2002), policy practitioners have placed increasing emphasis on recruiting current residents as 'active citizens' in the revitalisation of places. The resultant rush to support social networks, voluntary associations and more generally to engender social capital (Boyle and Rogerson, 2006) all reinforce the desire to retain those very groups that under 'roll back' neoliberal programs were being encouraged to move.

Increasingly empirical evidence has also reinforced the significance of quality of life factors as being as important to achieve such anchoring of people to place, and some might argue more important than pulling them to alternative locations. A recent survey conducted in Canada to assess the motivations behind workforce mobility revealed that a community can exert in many ways a strong pull on its residents. Indeed the survey of 504 residents in Ottawa, Canada found that only a small portion of community residents (generally those single, young and unemployed) were likely to be footloose enough to follow the call to "greener pastures".

Most Ottawa residents, on the other hand, remained tied to place by bonds of family, an appreciation of the city, existing job opportunities and local roots. Beyond

these factors, various combinations of ‘quality of life’ factors were observed to play an important role in anchoring residents.

The survey’s objective was to assess general confidence levels in employment opportunities, training and support programs for unemployed and employed persons, the appropriateness and availability of continuous learning, and to assess workforce mobility and the ‘stickiness’ of the community. The survey was considered accurate to $\pm 4\%$.

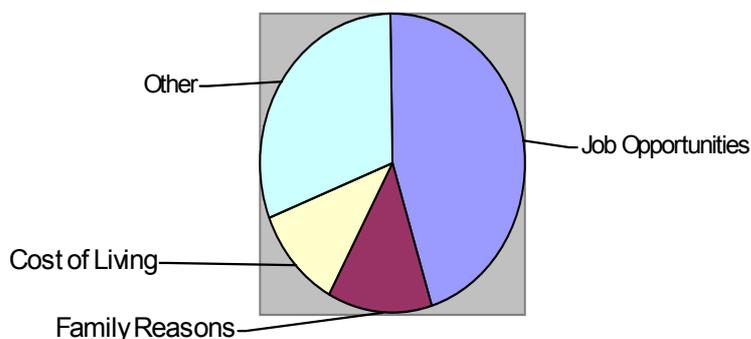
Among the respondents, 32.4% were not in the workforce (retired, students, homemakers, disabled and others) 51.9% were employed, 12.4% were self-employed and 4.8% unemployed. Among the respondents, 52% worked for the public sector, 40% for private sector firms and 6% for non-profit organizations making the survey comparable to a national labour force profile (HRDC, 2002) at that time.

Less than a third, 29%, of region’s residents indicated that if given the opportunity they were “likely or somewhat likely” to move from Ottawa. As a base of comparison, a national news poll in December 2001 (Macleans/CBC, 2001) found that 25% of Canadians would move to the USA if given the opportunity. The tendency to move was more pronounced among Anglophones (29%) than Francophones (26%) or other language groups (23%).

Of those residents most likely to move, almost half said they would do so to follow job opportunities elsewhere (49%) while others suggested they would move to take advantage of lower cost of living elsewhere (12%) or for family reasons (13%). The footloose trend was strongest with 18-34 year olds (43%) and much less so with those over 55 (16%). Within the younger age group, moving to follow job opportunities was the principal motivator (54%). Among seniors the main motivator for leaving was taxes (20%), although within the general survey sample ‘high taxes’ was not a significant motivator (< 7%), less than those who would move for weather reasons (see **Figure 2 below**).

Amongst the 70% of the survey’s respondents who were unlikely to move, the strongest factors anchoring them to the region were: family and an appreciation of the region (both 27%) together with existing job opportunities and local roots (both 16%), although respondents with university degrees were slightly more inclined to stay for work reasons (21%).

Figure 2: Most Cited Reasons for Leaving Canada’s National Capital Region



Source: Wilson, C., et al., 2002

When asked to identify their own reasons for *staying*, most respondents (94.5%) identified some collection of quality of life factors (such as liking the city, access to nature, arts, culture and sports, beauty of the city, size, services, safety, education, location, comfort, bilingualism, diversity, weather, friendliness, good for raising children, transportation, a non-stressful nature, etc.) as reasons for staying. Social factors (such as friends, family or personal networks) were noted by 69% of those unlikely to leave, while economic reasons (including job opportunities, low cost of living and property ownership) amounted to a much less significant attachment to the region (21%).

A tool for social learning

In this context, where the ratings are less about relocation and more place enhancement, the PRA and other similar rankings can provide a catalyst for social learning and a tool for determining which type of collective learning is appropriate. It is the cognitive dissonance such rankings generate between the ‘on the ground’ reality and the reality suggested by the rankings that cause people to reflect on the question of what’s right. This dissonance can often lead to collective learning by way of ‘learning by doing’, through *single-* or *double-loop* learning (Argyris and Schön, 1974). The rankings act somewhat like a mirror and when the local reflection is not consistent with local expectations, it instigates further reflection about the cause (or causes) of the difference.

If the ranking results are not as expected, then they can assist community representatives to:

- A. Clean the mirror by suggesting changes to what’s being measured or how it’s being measured (*learning by doing*). Since the measures are never assumed to be perfect, a trial and error process over time will likely ensue, gradually improving the quality of the rankings feedback. The criticisms and complaints associated with the early editions of the PRA are consistent with this type of learning but have also informed the Oregon Benchmarks studies (Conrad and Tryens, 2005) and the Austin, Texas quality of life priorities (Myers, 1989)
- B. Change the community strategies (*single loop learning*) trying different approaches to affect different outcomes. This implies both the governing variables and the measurement tools are accepted as correct as is reflected in the fashion of undertaking new urban planning studies, cluster studies, community market studies in vogue with municipal governments since the mid 1990s. In the UK, the Nottingham Community Forum (2000) exemplified this.
- C. Change the community’s basic governing variables such as assumptions, goals, governance mechanisms, values, etc. and then define an entirely new type of strategy (*double loop learning*) that is being reflected in smart growth planning, ecology based planning, one system planning efforts and usually involving a collaborative, community-wide process. One example of this is the adoption of quality of life indicators by the City Council of Melbourne Australia as targets to aspire to through their liveability study (Stokie, 1999).

In this context the ranking itself can be less important as an objective measure than it is as a catalyst for ‘sensemaking’ (Weick, 1995) by community stakeholders. What the ranking’s indicators mean to local stakeholders may not be the same as the meaning suggested by the ranking’s authors. Still, ratings like the PRA can contribute

to social learning and collective decision making if their author-defined significance is not held as an absolute.

Not everyone, however, embraces the idea of using place-based ratings for this purpose. One such is Doug Henton of Collaborative Economics and principal researcher for one of the US's most successful and highly regarded community indexes, the *Index of Silicon Valley*, which has been published annually since 1995. According to Henton (personal comm., 2000),

“many people encourage the practice of benchmarking one community against another. I'm not so sure that this is an altogether helpful thing. What you need in any situation of collaborative [community] activity are indicators of progress, not that some other community has been more successful on a certain issue than you have. The latter can be quite depressing. It's better I think to measure against your own baseline”⁽²⁾.

In the search of identity, belonging and community (re-)building, the homogeneity of comparative rankings may be unhelpful. That said, few communities are so self sufficient that they can completely ignore comparisons elsewhere. To improve themselves they often have to rely on external assistance, external funders and the ongoing attraction of resources and investors beyond their borders, most of whom will want to shop comparatively.

Building communities

Whilst place rating may have some resonance in such sensemaking, in contemporary political economy the realm of community has grown increasingly important (DeFillipis et al, 2006). Such heightened significance is not without problems, for politicians and others have promoted communities as the site (both spatial and otherwise) for greater democratic participation and as a counterbalance to the ‘roll-back’ neoliberal emphasis on state and markets. Whether in addressing issues of social welfare and services, or of economic and employment targets, in the US and elsewhere, communities have become the ‘frontline’ for renegotiating the relationship between citizens and their governments and consequently have become key partners in addressing social agendas (Wilson, 2007).

While this elevation has at times almost romanticised the notion of community, portraying it as an unequivocal good (Mayer, 2003; Shragge, 2003), it has often sidelined significant critiques associated with the conception of community itself. Communities are fundamentally where human multiplicity and differences are aggregated. Thus they are the central focus of how we coordinate ourselves and work together to sustain and reproduce ourselves. To quote DeFillipis et al. (2006, 685), communities are:

“the realm of social reproduction in society...(and) also the site not only of where life is lived but of critical social, political, economic and cultural institutions and relationships”.

Measures which identify whether a diverse community can develop its capacity to work together in ways that enrich its economy whilst simultaneously improving its liveability and quality of life would therefore be more realistic measures of community. Yet such measures would sit uneasily with the scalar measures of SMSAs employed in the PRA. While such a scale was logical in an economic model driven by

one-dimensional growth agendas, the inability to capture and represent the complexity of human diversity within metropolitan areas ultimately limits the utility of PRA-type community rankings.

CONCLUSIONS

All place rating exercises are open to critique, and as one of the most successful over the past 25 years, the *Places Rated Almanac* has not been exempted. Yet such critiques, however, have focused primarily on the internal economic logic and workings of the ranking process without critically considering other more complex metrics, subjectivities and community-based capacities.

Epitomizing the desire for place comparisons as part of the stiffening place competition which characterized the 'roll-back' forms of neoliberalism, the value of such ratings however has changed. Despite its adaptability in the past to new opportunities, the fundamental conception of the *Almanac* in terms of limited scope and holism will inevitably place it on the margins of contemporary comparative debates over places in the future.

FOOTNOTES

1. State and Local Government Internet directory (<http://www.statelocalgov.net/>) currently lists 11,146 members
2. In conversation, Palo Alto, CA September 2000

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APPENDIX A: TABLES

Table 1 – Comparing Top 30 Areas of Highest Net Migration to PRA Rankings

MSA	Net Migration Ranking	% Net Increase 2000	Overall PRA Rank 2000
Las Vegas, NV--AZ	1	14.41	121
Punta Gorda, FL	2	13.61	215
Naples, FL	3	12.77	238
Myrtle Beach, SC	4	11.69	240
Fort Myers--Cape Coral, FL	5	10.43	92
Ocala, FL	6	10.14	326
State College, PA	7	9.38	234
Lawrence, KS	8	8.89	293
Sarasota--Bradenton, FL	9	8.71	55
Austin--San Marcos, TX	10	8.35	20
Wilmington, NC	11	8.32	167
Daytona Beach, FL	12	8.16	64
Greeley, CO (PMSA)	13	8.10	298
Bloomington--Normal, IL	14	8.09	174
Grand Junction, CO	15	7.87	210
Fort Pierce--Port St. Lucie, FL	16	7.79	219
Raleigh--Durham--Chapel Hill, NC	17	7.68	6
Fort Collins--Loveland, CO	18	7.62	208
Phoenix--Mesa, AZ	19	7.54	10
Boise City, ID	20	7.24	46
Fayetteville--Springdale--Rogers, AR	21	7.23	91
Bryan--College Station, TX	22	6.83	185
Barnstable--Yarmouth, MA	23	6.75	237
Bellingham, WA	24	6.58	168
Athens, GA	25	6.36	223
San Luis Obispo--Atascadero--Paso Robles, CA	26	6.24	196
Charlotte--Gastonia--Rock Hill, NC--SC	27	6.24	55
Greenville, NC	28	6.19	249
Orlando, FL	29	6.16	22
Atlanta, GA	30	5.67	33

The correlation between PRA ranking and areas of highest net migration = -0.273

Table 2 – Comparing Top 30 PRA Locations to Absolute In-Migration Rank

MSA	PRA Rank 2000	Total In-migrants	Absolute In- migration Rank
Salt Lake City--Ogden, UT	1	163782	47
Washington, DC--MD--VA--WV (PMSA)	2	609427	3
Seattle--Bellevue--Everett, WA (PMSA)	3	352801	18
Tampa--St. Petersburg--Clearwater, FL	4	394574	13
Denver, CO (PMSA)	5	356933	17
Raleigh--Durham--Chapel Hill, NC	6	260019	28
Houston, TX (PMSA)	8	433254	10
Minneapolis--St. Paul, MN--WI	9	130563	59
Phoenix--Mesa, AZ	10	582206	4
Cincinnati, OH--KY--IN (PMSA)	11	166121	46
Pittsburgh, PA	12	149474	52
Knoxville, TN	13	101225	77
Louisville, KY--IN	14	616948	2
San Francisco, CA (PMSA)	15	241013	32
Orange County, CA (PMSA)	16	363701	15
Miami, FL PMSA	17	31559	226
San Diego, CA	19	424318	11
Austin--San Marcos, TX	20	279963	25
New Orleans, LA	21	104314	70
Orlando, FL	22	336832	20
Indianapolis, IN	23	191705	42
Honolulu, HI	24	105760	69
Greensboro--Winston-Salem--High Point, NC	25	170636	45
Portland--Vancouver, OR--WA (PMSA)	26	283841	24
San Jose, CA (PMSA)	27	201139	40
Cleveland--Lorain--Elyria, OH (PMSA)	28	154079	50
Philadelphia, PA--NJ (PMSA)	29	374787	14
Rochester, NY	30	89588	86
Nashville, TN	30	35836	209
Syracuse, NY	32	69412	110

The correlation between PRA rank and Absolute in-migration rank = 0.379

Table 3 – Comparing Top 30 Areas in PRA Job Index with In-Migration Rank

MSA	PRA Jobs Index	Absolute In-migration Rank
Phoenix--Mesa, AZ	1	4
Las Vegas, NV--AZ	2	12
Riverside--San Bernardino, CA (PMSA)	3	6
Atlanta, GA	4	1
Portland--Vancouver, OR--WA (PMSA)	5	24
Fort Worth--Arlington, TX (PMSA)	6	23
Salt Lake City--Ogden, UT	7	47
Austin--San Marcos, TX	8	25
San Diego, CA	9	11
Orlando, FL	10	20
Seattle--Bellevue--Everett, WA (PMSA)	11	18
Raleigh--Durham--Chapel Hill, NC	12	28
San Antonio, TX	14	35
Sacramento, CA (PMSA)	15	31
Orange County, CA (PMSA)	16	15
Denver, CO (PMSA)	17	17
Dallas, TX (PMSA)	18	7
Houston, TX (PMSA)	19	10
Minneapolis--St. Paul, MN--WI	20	59
Tampa--St. Petersburg--Clearwater, FL	21	13
Charlotte--Gastonia--Rock Hill, NC--SC	22	29
Nashville, TN	23	209
Fort Lauderdale, FL (PMSA)	24	22
Washington, DC--MD--VA--WV (PMSA)	26	3
Tucson, AZ	27	49
Memphis, TN--AR--MS	28	81
Sarasota--Bradenton, FL	29	62
Boise City, ID	30	92

The correlation between PRA Jobs Index and Absolute in-migration = 0.461

Table 4 – Comparing Florida’s ‘Creative Class’ Index with PRA Index

MSA	Creative Class Index 2000	PRA Index 2000
Austin--San Marcos, TX	1	20
San Francisco, CA (PMSA)	2	15
Seattle--Bellevue--Everett, WA (PMSA)	3	3
Burlington, VT	4	129
Boston, MA--NH (PMSA)	5	41
Raleigh--Durham--Chapel Hill, NC	6	6
Portland--Vancouver, OR--WA (PMSA)	7	26
Madison, WI	8	79
Boise City, ID	9	46
Minneapolis--St. Paul, MN--WI	10	9
Albuquerque, NM	11	57
Washington, DC--MD--VA--WV (PMSA)	11	2
Sacramento, CA (PMSA)	13	76
Denver, CO (PMSA)	14	5
Atlanta, GA	15	33
Fort Collins--Loveland, CO	17	208
Des Moines, IA	18	107
San Diego, CA	19	19
New York, NY (PMSA)	20	65
Dallas, TX (PMSA)	21	44
Fort Worth--Arlington, TX (PMSA)	21	71
Iowa City, IA	21	183
Santa Barbara--Santa Maria--Lompoc, CA	23	90
Lansing--East Lansing, MI	24	178
Tallahassee, FL	25	116
Colorado Springs, CO	26	106
Salt Lake City--Ogden, UT	27	1
Phoenix--Mesa, AZ	28	10
Rochester, MN	29	224
Provo--Orem, UT	30	161

The correlation between the ‘Creative Class’ Index and the PRA index = 0.477

