

# Interview with Neil Lee – “If we want to have innovative cities, they have to deliver for everyone”

*Neil Lee is Professor of Economic Geography at LSE with a particular interest in cities. In an interview with LSE Cities, he discusses what’s driving anti-metropolitan politics in Europe and how a more inclusive innovation economy could help address it.*

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**Let’s talk about populism, if we can use that term. It seems to be a force in European politics, as it has been in the US, with Brexit or the rise of support for far-right nationalist parties in France, Italy, Hungary, Poland and elsewhere. And, arguably, there is also a left-wing version of this – people vote against the “system” from the left as well as the right. Do you see clear geographic patterns to this and patterns in terms of cities and non-cities?**

There’s a perception that cities are the homes of liberal values – things like women’s rights, LGBTQ rights – that most people at an institution like LSE take for granted. We recently published research looking at rural urban polarisation around the world. This shows that there is indeed an urban–rural divide in these values in Europe. You can see it in voting patterns and you can see it in some of the political protests.

The [gilets jaunes movement in France](#), for example, was called the revolt of the suburbs and the countryside against the sort of policies that were favoured by city dwellers and politicians like Emmanuel Macron. In the bigger, richer European countries this divide was clear. But we also found something more troubling, which is that these socially liberal values were really only felt in the rich cities of the developed world. So, while we believe that cities everywhere are liberal, it is only really cities in rich countries that are.

**How would you explain the differences in attitudes between Europe’s cities and other areas? How much can be explained by the demographic makeup of cities? And how much is explained by what social scientists refer to as “place effects”? Does where you live affect your view of the world?**

People in cities tend to be younger, be recent migrants, have spent more time in education and so on. That can explain a lot about why cities are more progressive. But research shows that where you live – in particular, where you grow up – does affect your attitudes. It also seems that for adults, staying in the place where you were born, rather than moving out, influences your outlook, controlling for everything else.

**So, we find these clear differences between people who live in cities and those that don't. But do we know if these gaps have got bigger? Can we say Europe's cities and nations are growing apart?**

I suspect the differences have always been there, but they've got deeper. One of the themes of the populist playbook has been to pit the big cities against the rest. We did some work that showed that a lot of the urban–rural divide comes out of the Eurozone crises of 2008 to 2015. That was the spark. People's trust in the political system fell right across Europe after the crash and the public spending cuts that followed.

But trust was much slower to recover outside of richer metropolitan areas. It's not just about city versus rural, you also see this in bigger versus smaller cities – for example, London versus Leeds or Glasgow. And the division is stark in southern Europe, where cuts to government spending were pretty devastating. It was bad for Athens but worse for other parts of Greece, which were very dependent on the state for benefits, transport and public services.

**Why does it matter if some areas do worse than others? Shouldn't we be thinking about people, not places?**

I think it really matters if there's a geographical division in your democracy. It's difficult if parts of a country take vastly different paths, and the people in them feel very differently. It erodes social solidarity. We've seen this in the US with Donald Trump beating up on the cities – even though he's from New York!

**You write a lot about inclusive innovation. Many of Europe's cities are highly dynamic places with strong digital, creative and scientific sectors. But these are often highly unequal cities, with success squeezing out those without the same skills or private wealth. What does inclusive innovation actually mean?**

I'm interested in inclusivity from two perspectives. One is about how we manage the

impact that big innovation investments have on the affordability of a place. I'm from Oxford. I look at my childhood friends who stayed in the area. None of them can afford to live there, in part because all the public funding that has gone into the innovation economy has driven up house prices.

So, I'm motivated by this question: how can you invest in innovation in a way that doesn't have those negative consequences? But I am also interested in how you can include more people in the innovation economy. This matters partly for ethical reasons, but also because if you have a very exclusive innovation economy then it's not going to be the most dynamic it can be.

**What do you think is the right scale for thinking about this? Is it the city region, or can you think about creating an inclusive national economy or continent?**

I think you do both. There are three groups of European countries that are strong on innovation, and a high proportion of the benefits go to workers: the Nordics, the lowland countries, and Alpine areas of Germany, Austria and Switzerland. This does not happen much outside Europe, except, perhaps, in Japan. And it's delivered through an interplay of national, city and firm policies.

The Swiss model is interesting because they have top universities, but they also have applied universities. These applied universities are much better at working with smaller companies that aren't necessarily at the leading edge but are supported to use innovation. Plus, they have colleges and labour market regulation that mean people who are mid- and low-qualified can be trained for new jobs and get well paid in them.

You can earn a good living as a lab technician in Switzerland. As a result, you get a good supply of well-trained lab technicians – something that employers really value. These policy frameworks are about diffusion of innovation. They're about letting people who are not necessarily at the leading edge of innovation benefit from being close to companies, firms or labs that are.

**Is there a connection between your interest in national solidarity and inclusive innovation?**

Yes. If we want to have an innovative economy and innovative cities, they have to deliver for everyone. Going back to the Oxford example, my friends will take the view that, "Well,

Oxford's got loads of R&D and all that's happened is I now have to live on the outskirts, miles away from mum and dad". That leads to a suspicion of innovation and hostility towards experts and universities. One of my arguments for inclusive innovation is that it will stem those anti-innovation politics.

**Neil Lee was interviewed by Ben Rogers, Director of the European Cities Programme at LSE Cities, for [Old Cities New Ambitions: The Future of Urban Europe](#), published by LSE Cities.**

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*Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Calin Stan/Shutterstock.com](#)*

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