



ZRC SAZU

Navigating Smallness: Agency & Multiscalarity in the Transformation of Industrial Towns in Slovenia and Switzerland

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Motivation, relevancy



Industrial towns are:

peripheral

vulnerable

too small

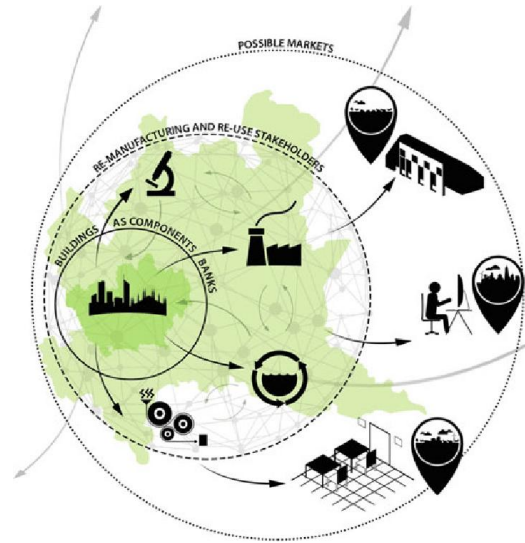
yet valuable:

Hubs of
industrial
production

unique
innovation

“surprisingly”
resilient

What do we need to know?



Geography:

Is smallness an opportunity or liability for transformation (and why or how)?

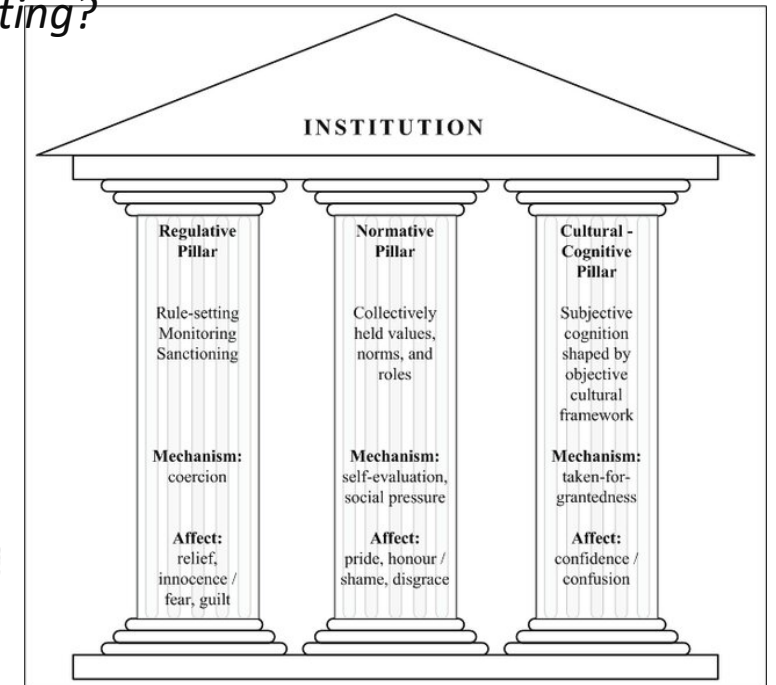
Human agency:

How local actors work and influence transformation outcomes?

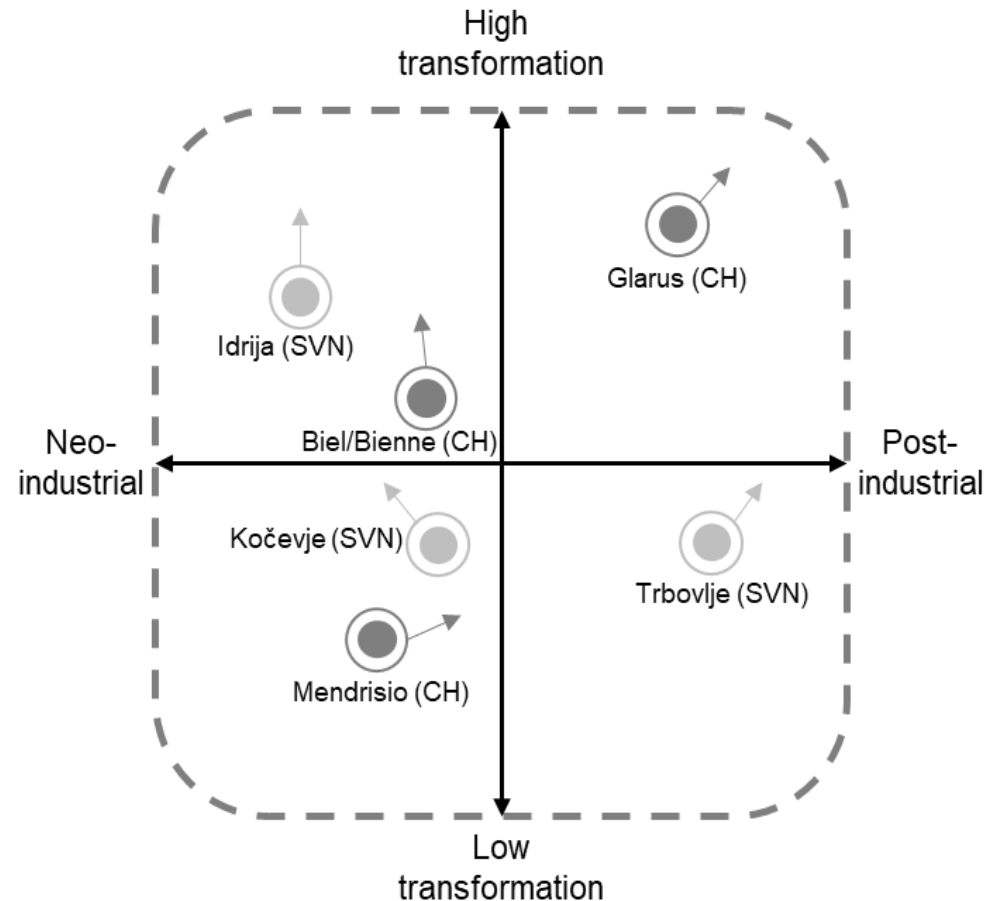


Institutions:

How are institutions created, changed or destroyed in this unique geographical and historical setting?



Methodology, case studies



SI and CH: the important role of smaller towns

CH: hi-tech industries; SI: export, mid-tech

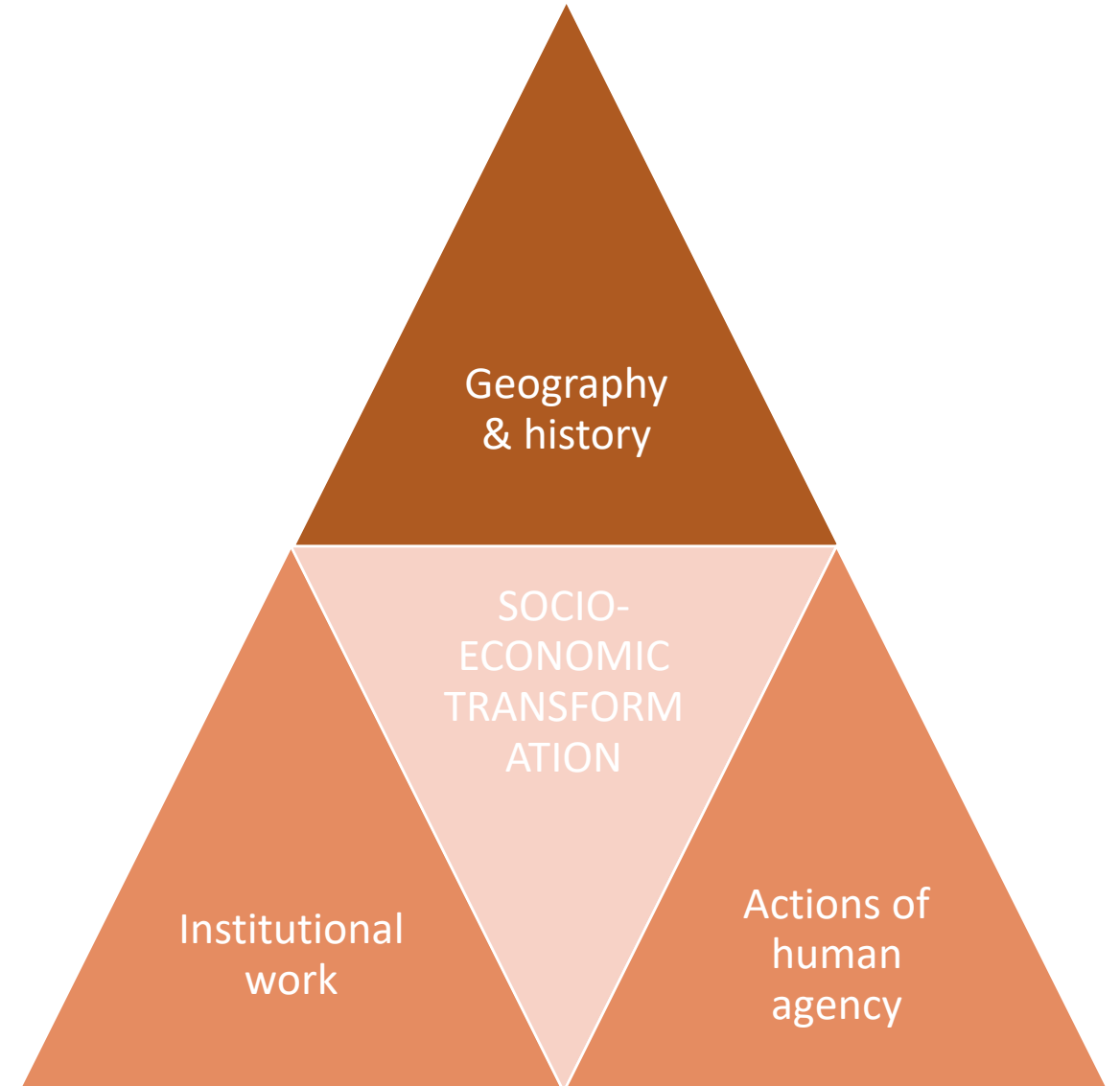
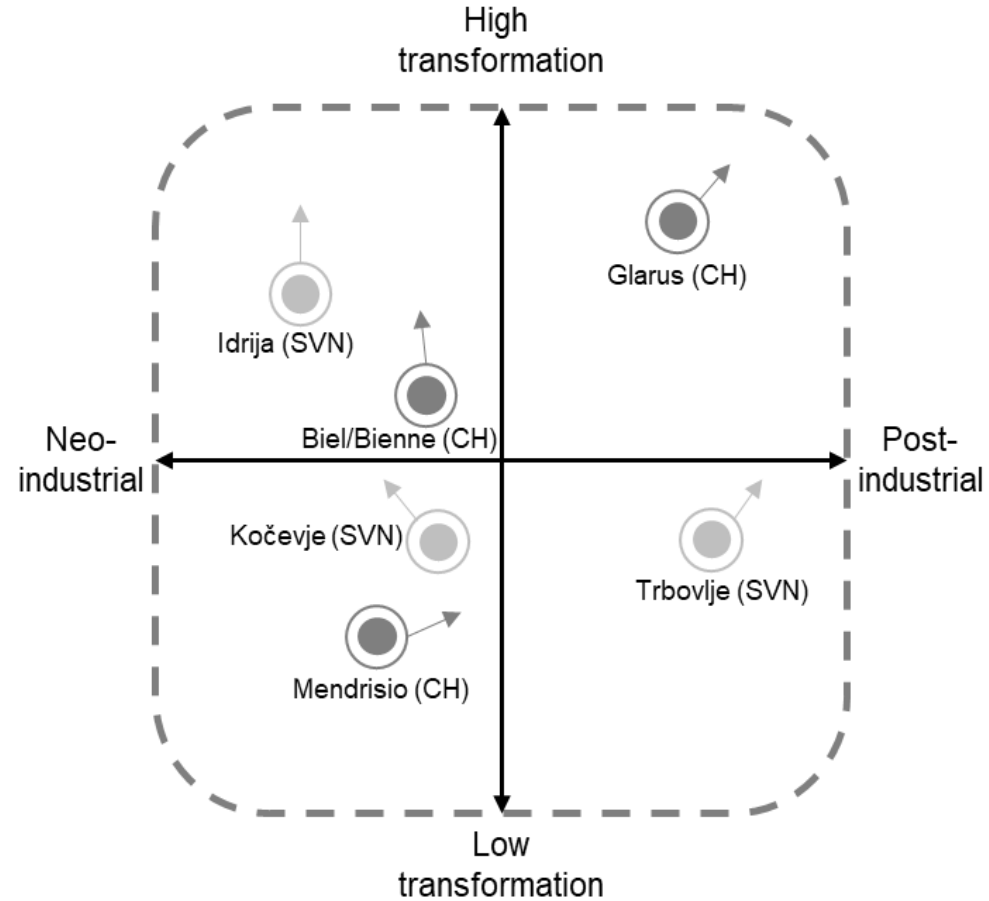
CH: stability; SI: great transformations

CH: liberal market economy; SI: coordinated

Secondary sources: literature, newspaper articles ...

Primary source: 84 interviews (44 CH, 40 SI)

Methodology, case studies

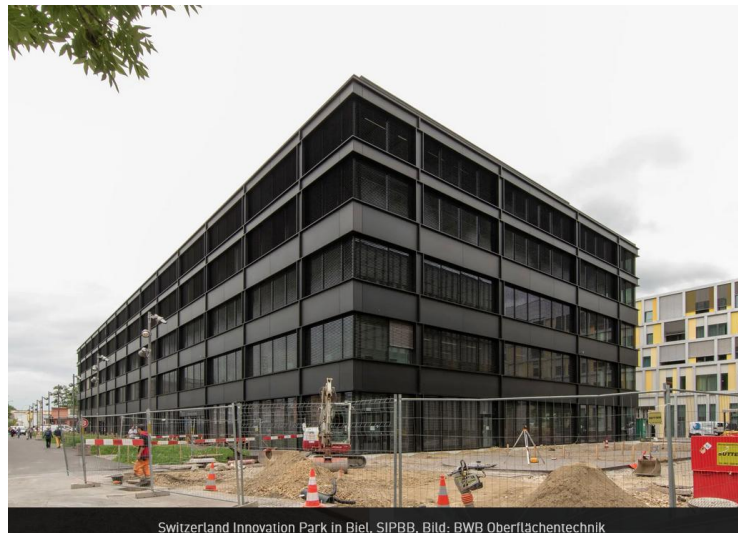


Result 1: Smallness as an opportunity / liability

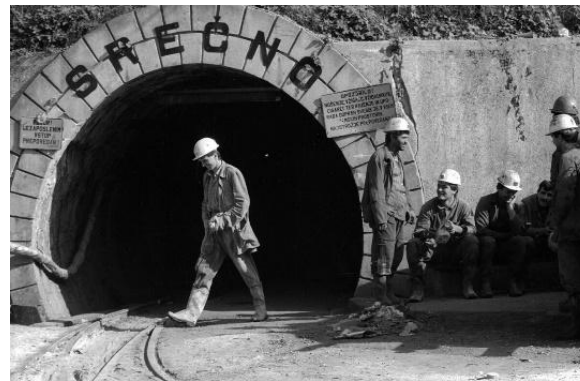
HUMAN AGENCY

- Coordinated human agency: collaboration, building coalitions and going beyond the local scale
- Contested human agency: conflicting views on development (and history!)

Biel / Bienne (CH)



Trbovlje (SI)



Result 2: Smallness as an opportunity / liability

INSTITUTIONAL WORK

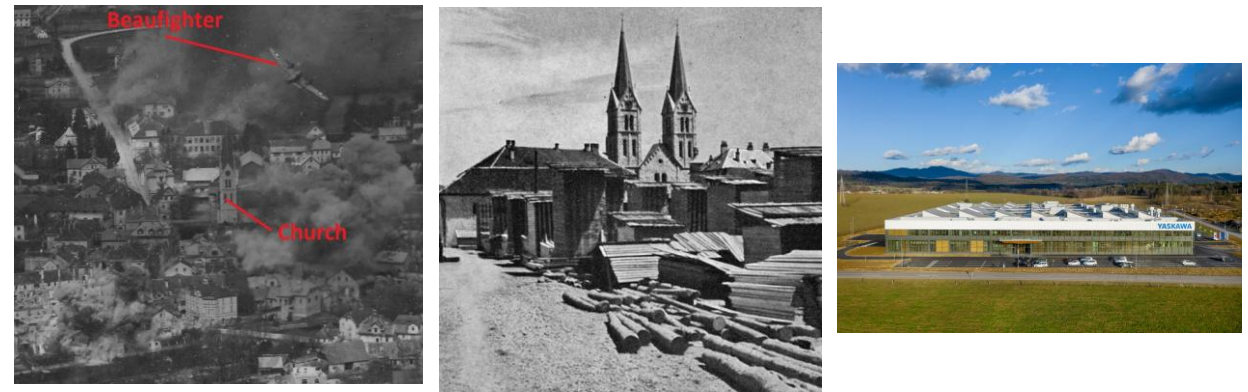
- Leveraging older informal institutions (norms, rules, habits) for new development

Idrija (SI)



- Institutional work maintaining existing structures and power relations (dependency, learned helplessness, elitism ...)

Kočevje (SI)

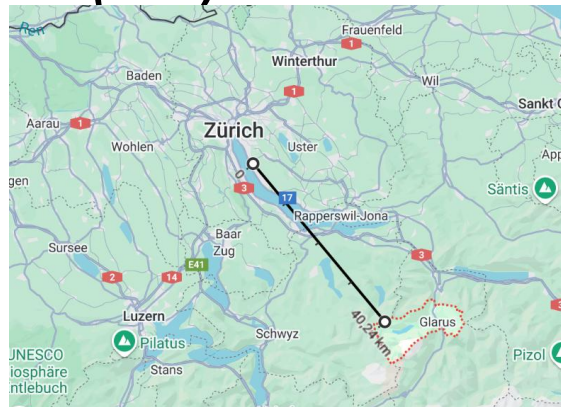


Result 3: Smallness as an opportunity / liability

GEOGRAPHY

- Leveraging geographical position (borrowing-size from larger centres)

Glarus (CH)



- Urban shadowing effect and locking-in existing development

Mendrisio (CH)



Smallness: theoretical implications

Institutions

Strong informal institutions

developed in a small town context

- + export orientation
- + worker loyalty and adaptability
- developmental conservatism
- elitism, nepotism



No multiscalarity



Human agency

Collective agency and its adaptability (proximity, ease of communication)

- + building local coalitions
- + system-level agency
- Uneven power relations
- Conflicts, lock-ins

Geography & history

Urban networks: borrowing size, agglomeration shadows

- + gaining functions from urban agglomerations
- draining of workers and capital

Possible contribution

- **Geographical contextualisation**

(smallness – proximity – tight networks – place attachment ...)

- **Historical contextualisation**

(norms and other institutions, economic cultures ...)

/ further research

- **Agentic strategies in smaller towns / regions**

collective agency

building local coalitions

leveraging smallness

...

Project: **“Places that don’t matter? Socio-economic transformation of industrial towns in Switzerland and Slovenia”**

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Thank you for you attention!

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