

Economic Geography: A Contemporary Introduction

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Preface

The world around us is powerfully shaped by economic forces. The economy, as we experience it in everyday life, is innately geographical. There is no economy ‘out there’, floating in the atmosphere, detached from the lived reality. Rather the economy is a set of grounded, real world processes, a set of complex social relations that vary enormously across, and because of, geographical space. Our argument in this book is that the set of approaches offered by the field of economic geography is best placed to help us appreciate and understand the modern economic world in all its complexity. To ignore geographical variation leads to a retreat into the unreal, hypothetical world of mainstream economics, with all its many underlying assumptions and simplifications.

In the pages that follow, we adopt a particular approach in making our case for an economic-geographical perspective. Before outlining this approach, we should be clear about what this book is not! This note is especially important for instructors and professors teaching economic geography courses. First, our book is not a statistical and factual compendium on the current geographies of the global economy. In other words, this is not an almanac for economic geography courses; there are many such books already available in the market. The Internet is now a much more effective medium to access contemporary economic data, which has an exceptionally short shelf-life. Hence, we are not primarily concerned with how much coal there is in Northeast England or Shenyang, China, or how many textile factories are located in Bangladesh or the Mexican *maquiladoras*. Moreover, we do not attempt to offer a systematic survey of all parts of the global economy, either by sector or by region. Again, this kind of economic geography text is already available.

Second, the book is not structured as an intellectual history of economic geography, systematically charting a path from the subdiscipline’s origins in the commercial geographies of the late 19th century through to the very pluralist economic geography that exists today. Neither does it offer a series of literature reviews of work at the research frontiers of contemporary economic geography. Existing ‘readers’ and ‘companions’ offer exactly such an access to the economic geography literature (Bryson *et al.*, 1999; Barnes *et al.*, 2003). Our view is that many undergraduate students are initially nervous and/or ambivalent about this intellectual history approach, and that we first need to engage them fully in the *substantive issues* of economic life. By demonstrating the insights economic geography can offer, students will then be equipped to later explore the intellectual and methodological lineage of the field.

Third, the book deliberately blurs the distinction between economic geography and what has conventionally been labelled ‘development geography’. In various ways, we have woven issues of development, poverty and inequality into our discussion of an economic-geographical perspective, thereby rejecting the notion that development geography is about the Global South and economic geography is about the Global North. By integrating substantive issues and empirical examples from across the globe, we adopt a more inclusive approach to economic geography.

Given these parameters, what then is this book really about? In its essence, this book takes the form of a series of linked chapters on *topical issues* and *contemporary debates* that draw upon, and showcase, the best of economic geography research. These issues are drawn from contemporary economic life, which is increasingly constituted at a global scale – from uneven development, space-shrinking technologies, and environmental degradation to powerful global corporations, organized labour, and ethnic economies. We see each of these as issues rather than just phenomena – that is, they are processes to be debated rather than factual realities to be described. Each chapter thus seeks to answer a significant contemporary question that a curious and well-informed undergraduate reader might reasonably be expected to ask about the world around them.

This, then, is not a conventional text: our aim is to develop well-grounded *arguments* from an economic geography perspective, not necessarily to present simplifications of multiple viewpoints or collections of facts and data. We are, however, trying to develop these arguments in straightforward and accessible ways. The book is intended to be used in introductory courses in economic geography in the first or second year of an undergraduate degree programme. The chapters should be seen as bases for discussion rather than collections of facts and truths needing to be reproduced in examination scripts. Nor are they intended to substitute for classroom lectures to elaborate on some of the theoretical themes or empirical case studies provided here. It is a book very much intended to support an introductory course in economic geography and to socialize students into the fascinating world of contemporary economic geographical research.

Notwithstanding the above comments, in this book we are seeking to advance and advocate a *certain kind* of economic geography, although this underlying position, for reasons alluded to above, is not always made explicit on a chapter-by-chapter basis. From the outset, however, it is important that readers – and particularly instructors and professors – are at least aware of how our favoured approach sits within the sub-discipline of economic geography more broadly. In short, we seek to combine the best of both the *political economy perspective* that entered economic geography from the 1970s onwards and the *new economic geographies* that are generally seen to have risen to prominence

since 1990 (see Box 1.2 for more). We are not championing and legitimizing an either/or approach to the theoretical and empirical insights afforded by these perspectives. Such an epistemological or paradigmatic debate is much better covered in more advanced texts (e.g. Hudson, 2004). Instead, we intend this book to be a celebration of *multiple* theoretical perspectives, including the new economic geographies, in contemporary economic geography research.

The political economy perspective is now well known in economic geography, but we should distinguish clearly how our conception of new economic geographies is different from the quantitative modelling version of so-called ‘new economic geography’ in economics (e.g. Krugman, 2000; Fujita and Krugman, 2004). In common with other economic *geographers*, we will refer to the latter as ‘geographical economics’. ‘New economic geography’ is a very different proposition and describes an approach to economic geography that has been influenced by the recent ‘cultural turn’ in human geography (and the wider social sciences). This has created a geographical approach to the economy that contextualizes economic processes by situating them within different social, political, and cultural relations.

In doing so, new economic geography is not merely concerned with the economic realm, but also with how such a realm is intertwined with other spheres of social life. While there are publications that encapsulate the various dimensions of this broad approach (e.g. Lee and Wills, 1997; Barnes and Sheppard, 2000), we believe this is the first textbook that seeks to demonstrate the benefits of such a multi-faceted approach to an undergraduate audience. Moreover, our aim in this book is to try and blend the nuanced insights of these new economic geographies about everyday economic life with the analytical rigour that a political economy approach brings to understanding the inherent logics and mechanisms of the capitalist system, and the social and spatial inequities that it actively (re)produces. We also take from the political economy perspective a critical and normative stance that leads us to question and interrogate constantly those inequities. We therefore make an explicit effort to demonstrate the value-added of such a geographical approach in relation to conventional economic analyses of these topics.

The book itself is structured around answering thirteen important questions that arise in everyday economic life. We also preface these questions, listed as each chapter heading, with an important analytical theme. *Part One* of the book is entitled ‘Conceptual foundations’ and explores in turn the ‘geography’ and ‘economic’ of economic geography. Chapter 1 counterposes a geographical view on the economy with that which might be adopted by a mainstream economist, and introduces the key geographical vocabulary of space, place and scale. Chapter 2 unpacks the apparently commonsense

notion of ‘the economy’ as something ‘static’ and ‘out there’ in conventional economics to reveal how we might think about the economy in more creative and critical ways. In *Part Two* on ‘Dynamics of economic space’, we focus on four broad dynamics inherent to the capitalist system: uneven geographical development (Chapter 3), commodity chains and their role in organizing economic space (Chapter 4), technological change and its ability to alter (albeit unevenly and partially) the geography of the economy (Chapter 5), and the commodification of nature and the environment (Chapter 6). *Part Three*, ‘Actors in economic space’, looks at four main groups of actors that play an active role in shaping economic geographies, namely the state, in all its scalar forms (Chapter 7), transnational corporations (Chapter 8), labour/workers (Chapter 9) and consumers (Chapter 10). In *Part Four*, entitled ‘Socialising economic life’ – and here we draw in particular on the so-called ‘new economic geographies’ – we bring in the dimensions of culture (Chapter 11), gender (Chapter 12), and ethnicity (Chapter 13) to our understanding of the spatial organization of economic activity, explicitly moving beyond conventional economic analysis to incorporate consideration of how these ‘non-economic’ variables shape economic processes.

A few further caveats should be noted at this point. First, in a text of this type and length we cannot hope to cover every aspect of economic geography, either within individual chapters, or across the book as a whole. We do, however, feel that we have covered the most significant debates in which economic geographers have been active and offering valuable insights in recent decades. Second, the book’s structure and scope makes it impossible to explore all the intersections between the chapter topics: in producing a text of this kind, some simplification is inevitable. Gender and ethnicity, for example, are bracketed out into separate chapters but in reality could be part of many others, and indeed heavily intersect themselves. Our strategy has been to break up economic geography into manageable and relatively coherent segments for an undergraduate audience and to use the introductory chapters in Part 1 to offer a more integrative analysis and to clearly differentiate our field from mainstream economics. Extensive cross-referencing of chapters also helps to make explicit connections between different themes, examples, arguments and case studies in various chapters.

Each chapter in this book follows a similar structure. We open with what we call the ‘hook’; a (hopefully engaging) contemporary example or issue used to introduce the key theme of the chapter. In the second section we tackle a commonly held myth or misapprehension about the topic at hand (e.g. the nation state is dead or transnational corporations are all powerful) and illustrate how these myths often rest, in large part, on an ‘ageographical’ (i.e. non-geographical) understanding of the world around us, particularly in mainstream economics. The main body of each chapter then serves

to illustrate the necessity and effectiveness of taking an explicitly geographical approach for understanding different aspects of the economy. Our aim is to make these arguments in a clearly understandable, lightly referenced, jargon-free manner, drawing on a wide range of examples from across different sectors of the economy, and from around the world. Boxes within the text (three to five per chapter, on average) offer further development of key concepts, case studies and examples for the reader, and the diagrams and photographs have been carefully chosen to illustrate further the various points we are making. The penultimate section of the chapter is designed to add a 'twist' to the arguments that have preceded it; or in other words, to probe somewhat more deeply into the complexity of contemporary economic geographies. Additional nuances and insights are offered in these twists. Each chapter then concludes with a deliberately short and pithy summary of the main themes covered.

What lies after the summary is also very important. First, for ease of use, the reference list is included on a chapter by chapter basis. For the instructor, this is also meant to facilitate use of the chapters in a more 'modular' manner that does not have to deal with topics in the order we have presented them here. Second, the further reading section guides the reader towards what we identify as the most engaging and accessible literature on the chapter's topic. To be clear, our objective here is not to bamboozle the reader with complicated and advanced texts at the cutting-edges of geographical research, but rather to select readings that further explicate and develop our arguments in a digestible manner for an undergraduate audience. Some of these readings identify the sources of well known case studies we have drawn from the geographical literature, enabling students to 'flesh out' the inevitably brief summaries we have been able to offer in the text. Third, we identify up to five online resources per chapter that can also be used to supplement the chapters. Overall, our intention is to offer an exploration of economic geography rich in examples and case studies that can, on the one hand, open students to economic life and practices in various parts of the world, and, at the same time, introduce concepts that can be 'put to work' in local contexts. Hence the text can be used alongside local literature and case studies wherever the book is used.

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