



# Critical notes on economic geography from an aging radical. Or radical notes on economic geography from a critical age<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** The paper is a personal reflection, interleaved with some autobiographical details, on the meaning of a critical perspective within economic geography. Stressed are the potential material implications of texts, the importance of a pluralist theoretical sensibility, and the necessity of an anticipatory-utopian impulse.

I always thought of myself as young and lively, as a critical geographer ready to fight the good fight against orthodoxy, until I attended a conference in Athens, Georgia, in spring 1999, when it became clear that I had become an old geezer. Compared to the other attendees my views seemed hardly radical, and I certainly didn't have the energy to compete with the younger set as they went bar hopping and talked earnestly late into the night about various weighty matters.

It wasn't always like that. I remember being fervently energetic about the radical possibilities of David Harvey's (1973) *Social Justice and the City* when I went to Oxford for a post-graduate interview in social work in 1977. "How can you not see its political relevance?" I badgered the interviewer. But she didn't. As a result, I was denied an opportunity "to do something useful," a phrase often on my lips, and instead I became a graduate student in geography at the University of Minnesota.

I say that only half tongue-in-cheek. Ever since I've been pursued by the guilty thought that I would have made more of a difference, been more useful, had I become a

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social worker rather than a professor of economic geography. I remember being at a party in Minneapolis, sitting on the floor with other guests in a loose circle, taking turns saying what we did. There was a nurse, a medical researcher, a planner, and other assorted “useful” occupations. When I said I was a graduate student in economic geography, one of them burst into uncontrollable laughter. “So what do you do, find new places?” he guffawed. Of course, it was spoken out of ignorance, but it also felt close to the bone. I’m also reminded of a story that John Hudson, a one-time economic geographer cum spatial scientist told me. He was at a faculty cocktail party in Madison, Wisconsin, in the late 1960s when someone asked him what he did, and without any self-consciousness he said, “points and lines.” Only later, when he reflected on the absurdity of that statement, did he think that maybe he should start doing something else.

That I’ve not done anything else other than be a professor of economic geography is, I’m sure, a result of inertia, as well as the various material and non-material blandishments associated with teaching in a large North American research university. It is also a result of my belief that through my words and actions in the teaching and writing of economic geography I can make some difference, that I can be useful. The American literary critic, Frank Lentricchia (1983, 10), writes, “struggles for hegemony are sometimes fought out in (certainly relayed through) colleges and universities; fought undramatically, yard for yard, and sometimes over minor texts of Balzac: no epic heroes, no epic acts.” On the face of it, it is hard to imagine that a similar statement might apply to, say, Peter Haggett’s (1965) *Locational Analysis in Human Geography*, or Doreen Massey’s (1984) *Spatial Divisions of Labour*, or Roger Lee and Jane Wills’s (1997) *Geographies of Economies*, all key texts in economic geography in different periods of its history. But I think they can.

I’ve been encouraged in this belief by recently reading Christopher Hitchens’s (2000) book, *Unacknowledged Legislation*. It is a collection of his book reviews written about various writers, mainly novelists and poets, whom he believes have made a difference to an Anglo-American political sensibility, for both good and bad. And Hitchens’ world is indissolvably cleaved into good and bad. On the good side are people like Oscar Wilde – almost a saint, except that Hitchens follows George Orwell in believing that “all saints are guilty unless proven innocent” – Orwell himself, and Gore Vidal. And on the bad side are people like Tom Wolfe (“a dandified poseur,” 316), Isaiah Berlin (“pompous and dishonest,” 140), and Conor Cruise O’Brien (whose book *On the Eve of the Millennium* is “a cause for disgust and depression,” 335). No punches pulled there. And Hitchens doesn’t pull his punches because he thinks there are pressing political reasons to contest such works; that their words will lead us astray. Of course, there are circumstances when the sword is much mightier than the pen. But as Hitchens (2000, xiv) writes, “there are things that pens can do, and swords cannot. And every tank, as Brecht said, has a crucial flaw. Its driver. Suppose that driver had read something good lately, or has a decent song or poem in his head ... .” It is in this sense that Hitchens believes, following Shelley, that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (quoted Hitchens 2000, xiii).

Could you stop a tank with a piece of economic geography? Probably not. Economic geography is a small academic subject within a minor discipline, at least within North America. That said, economic geographers have had their moments. There is the shameful work of Walter Christaller who, in spite of being a former member of the Communist party, joined the Nazis in 1940, and worked in Himmler’s Planning and Soil

Office under the agronomist, Konrad Meyer (Rössler, 1989). Christaller's task was to draw up plans for reconfiguring the economic geography of Germany's eastern conquests ("General plan of the East") – primarily Czechoslovakia and Poland, and if successful, Russia itself. Christaller was given special charge of planning Poland, and he did so using his central place theory as an explicit guide. It makes reading Christaller's (1967) *Central Places in Southern Germany* disconcerting and spooky.

Then there is a work like Peter Haggett's (1965) *Locational Analysis in Human Geography*. On the surface, its limpid prose, elegant diagrams, and mathematical equations are not the sort of thing to get people riled up to change the world. But from recent interviews I've carried out in connection with a project to write about the history of the quantitative revolution in geography during the 1950s and 1960s, and economic geography in particular, it is clear that Haggett's book had exactly that effect. Moreover, its influence was not just confined to within the academy, persuading people merely to write a different type of academic paper. Michael Dear, for example, speaks about the book as a "turning point" for him when he first read it as an undergraduate in the 1960s. As a socialist and someone interested in improving people's lives through urban planning, an ambition he realised after finishing his degree when he was hired by the Greater London Council, Dear thought that the large-scale mathematical models and statistical techniques found in Haggett's book were absolutely vital for changing cities for the good, and thereby improving the daily lot of ordinary people. At last, planners had the tools necessary, thought Dear, to effect progressive political change on the ground.

These are just two examples, but I hope they illustrate the point. Written words, even those of economic geographers, can have serious material effects, and thereby require critical scrutiny. I don't know if there have been pitched battles in seminars over Christaller's and Haggett's texts, "fought yard for yard." But there should have been. Those texts are not innocent — merely words — or without consequence. They don't just describe the world, but re-make it. As people who live in that world we have a right and responsibility to criticise, applaud, challenge, or support them.

What else can critical economic geographers do? Most obviously, we can speak and write about the world, and actively expose and confront injustice, gross unfairness, oppression, and the prejudice we find. This might involve speaking in our courses to students, writing up academic papers for publication, forging alliances with social movements, unions, and community organizations, going on protest marches, or initiating new forums for discussion and information and which of course this new journal represents. The People's Geography Project ([www.peoplesgeography.org](http://www.peoplesgeography.org)) organized by Don Mitchell at Syracuse University is another example, and through its web site disseminates information, allowing the possibility of networking and action. For example, on that web site is Andy Herod's Guerrilla Geography Pamphlet, "Just in time: the geography of workers' power" ([www.peoplesgeography.org/guerrilla.htm](http://www.peoplesgeography.org/guerrilla.htm)). Using as an example the 1998 GM strike based at Flint, Michigan, Herod demonstrates in plain language the strategic value of a geographical appreciation in countering flexible production systems. In doing so, Herod is trying to create linkages with in this case organized labour by moving economic geographical knowledge out of the academy and into the union hall.

Of course, these various forms of action may still not change and remedy the world, but at least they can reveal the sometimes-malevolent forces that conspire to make

it. I think the special insight of a critical economic geographer here is to show how taken-for-granted worlds are the product of complex temporal and geographical processes of power, and which can be exposed by various kinds of critical theory. The plural is important here. One of the lessons learnt from the yard-for-yard battles that have gone on in economic geography is that there is no single royal road to the truth. As Yogi Berra says, "If there is a fork in the road take it." That is, use whatever means you can, and see where they might lead. They might not work. But if not, try something else.

The rewards from this pluralistic and open-minded perspective are very evident within current economic geography where different kinds of critical approaches sit cheek-by-jowl (for reviews of the field see the two recent collections Clark, Feldman & Gertler, 2000, and Sheppard & Barnes, 2000). For example, Linda McDowell (1997) uses Butler's notion of performativity to illuminate the taken-for-granted worlds of female merchant bankers; or J. K. Gibson-Graham (1996) deploys queer theory to contest the hegemonic power of globalisation; or Erica Schoenberger (2001) discusses literary biography to reveal the basis of corporate decision-making. In these different works, the very idea of critical theory is rethought. As a consequence, Nigel Thrift and Kris Olds (1996, 313) argue that what is emerging is a "polycentric" economic geography consisting of a "set of narrative communities" that "celebrate a qualitative multiplicity of 'economic' times and spaces." In so doing, theory is transformed. Critical theory does not have a single source, or possess only one form, or hold an exclusive truth, but is much messier and sprawling, with no final, empirical means of proof. Even so, such accounts are persuasive and compelling, and help us to lay bear taken-for-granted worlds, whether of merchant bankers in the City of London, or families of Queensland miners in Australia, or CEOs in Manhattan, by connecting them to wider temporal and spatial systems of power, disciplinary and inequity.

Much of my own substantive work has been concerned to confront the profound changes occurring in the resource sector in my home province of British Columbia, especially the forest-products sector that has experienced an unrelenting decline in employment since the early 1980s. The consequence is that both lives and communities have been devastated. In trying to understand these changes occurring on Canada's resource margin, I've relied on what I've called marginal theory, and in particular the work of the Canadian economic historian, Harold Innis. I use that term marginal theory for two reasons and which go to the wider argument above about a new kind of critical economic geographical theory. First, it is a different kind of theory from mainstream ones, such as Marxism or neoclassicism, in that it is less categorical, more porous, more open in its conclusions (Barnes, 1996; especially chapter 6). Second, it is a theory constructed in the margin to understand the margin. In particular, Innis thought that to contest the dependency and disruptions of a resource economy, such as exists in British Columbia, requires a different kind of theory than the traditional type; a theory that is acutely sensitive to the local context, and in particular to the nuances of space and time. Only then is there a possibility of redemption (discussed more fully in Barnes, Hayter & Hay, 2001).

This leads to my last point. A critical economic geography should not only be in the business of the explanatory-diagnostic, but the anticipatory-utopian. That is, to use August Lösch's (1954, 4) felicitous phrase, the task of economic geographers is "not to explain our sorry reality, but to improve it." For Lösch this means mobilizing a series of complex equations and geometries. While this is unlikely the preferred mode among contemporary critical economic geographers, it might be one mode. The important point

(at least for me) is that critique should be directed from some sense of what a better world would be like. This requires that critical theory contain an imaginative capacity to reconfigure the world and our place within it, that it foreshadows a different kind of economic geography. It is true, as David Harvey (2000, chapter 8) argues, that most utopian projects when realised on the ground, geographically, turn into their antonym, distopia. Le Corbusier's "machines for living" become the Liverpool "piggeries," the bucolic suburban ideal of Frederick Law Olmstead become gated communities, and Jane Jacob's "community of eyes" become inner city neighbourhoods of video-camera surveillance, and steel-barred windows and doors. But for Harvey this is not the result of utopian thought per se, but a consequence of a market capitalism in which it is materially embedded. Harvey (2000, 195) writes:

There is a time and place in the ceaseless human endeavor to change the world, where alternative visions, no matter how fantastic, provide the grist for shaping powerful political forces for change. I believe we are precisely at such a moment. Utopian dreams ... never entirely fade away. They are omnipresent in the hidden signifiers of our desires.

One of the tasks of critical economic geographers is to recoup those desires. In recent work by economic geographers, this impulse is found in J. K. Gibson-Graham's (1996) writings. Shining through their prose is a vision of a better world, one where the ravages of globalisation have been expunged, leaving local communities with the ability to control their own fate, and to organize exchange systems in accordance with their own principles of fairness. Of course, one might disagree about the utopic nature of such a utopia. But the fact that it is there gives their writing a strength and critical edge that it would otherwise not have. It also directs the strategies of resistance they propose (small and local scale – "no epic heroes, no epic acts"), and the research in which they engage (around communities that have dropped out of the global system and which successfully survive whether in the Mandragon region in Spain, the Latrobe valley in Australia, or the Katahdin region in Maine (Bryne et al. 1998; Cameron & Gibson, 1999).

In a recent essay, Noel Castree (2000) talks about the transition from radical geography as it was first called when it was invented in the late 1960s and early 1970s, to critical geography, as it is now known. For Castree this name change is bound up with a broader process of professionalisation into which former radical geographers entered and eventually emerged at the other end as critical geographers. Such professionalisation, of course, continues, and is in part represented by the very inauguration of this virtual journal. Certainly, it seems a far cry from standing over a hot Xerox machine, and then stapling, and stuffing the final copy into envelopes, and which we always seemed to be doing as graduate students at the University of Minnesota with the Union of Radical Geographers newsletter. Putting it this way, there is an implication that I experienced the real thing: genuine radical geography. But, of course, this is untrue. Both then and now there is only the common difficult and halting task of offering social critique, of making use of different vocabularies to see if they produce what Richard Rorty (1999) calls "social hope." This insistent task confronts the younger set and old geezers, critical and radical geographers, and you and me.

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