

Economic Geography: Past, Present and Future. Edited by Sharmistha Bagchi-Sen and Helen Lawton Smith. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. xxii and 260 pp., diagsr., notes, and index. (ISBN10: 0-415-36784-0 hbk).

Reviewed by Trevor J. Barnes, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia.

On my rough count close to 70% of the contributors of Sharmistha Bagchi-Sen's and Helen Lawton Smith's edited book on economic geography are white men aged fifty and over. As a white man aged fifty and over I have some sympathies. But while this composition may be economic geography's past, one hopes it is not its present, let alone its future.

Over the last two decades, Anglo-American economic geography has enjoyed rude good health. Change has been incessant, with the field continually reinventing itself, and which has made for an exciting, dynamic and open subject. While at times the discipline sometimes resembles Penelope's shroud – spun during the day, and unravelled the same night – the result is a discipline marked by vibrancy, edginess, and porosity, and helping to set the larger agenda of English-speaking human geography. In part, this was brought about by incorporating the voices of different economic geographers, especially those of women, and to a lesser extent, those living outside the heartlands of Anglo-America. They brought new methods, particularly a smorgasbord of qualitative methods, as well new topics such as nature, work (as opposed to employment), and globalization.

Perhaps as a consequence of the character of its contributors, the twenty essays constituting Economic Geography: Past, Present and Future tends to look more towards the past than to the future, and producing an economic geography that is more a lopsided

and staid than it really is. I do not want to be overly critical. There are some fine essays in the volume and even the more modest chapters made points that made me glad I read them. But I wanted to hear other voices, especially younger ones, and outside the core (only two of the contributors work outside the UK and USA: Bjorn Asheim and Henry Yeung). A consortium of institutions have been behind the organisation of international summer schools for new economic geographers (graduate students and junior faculty) since 2003, and the Second Global Conference on Economic Geography occurred in Beijing in June 2007 (the first was held in Singapore in 2000). If Bagchi-Sen's and Lawton Smith's collection is to take seriously the last noun in their book's title, and maybe the penultimate one too, they needed a more diverse set of contributors.

I think they also needed a firmer editorial hand. It was hard to discern how individual chapters fitted together, or within the structure of the book. Everyone seemed to have a completely different idea about what they were supposed to write about. Chapters varied from autobiography (Richard Walker), to pallid literature review (Anne Green), to sweeping intellectual history (Allen Scott), to entertaining rant (John Lovering). There were some strong essays, but they emerged in the absence of an editorial presence rather than because of one. Second, at least three contributors were not economic geographers by training or institutional affiliation: Ann Markusen, Martin Kenney, and Rafiq Dossani. Their respective essays were good, but if non-institutionally affiliated economic geographers were to be included, why choose those three? The economist Paul Krugman was the non-economic geographer of choice if judged by the number and length of commentaries about him by other contributors to the book. Why not choose him? A clearer editorial statement would have helped. Finally, there were a

number of errors and typographical mistakes that marred the book and should have been caught, e.g., Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt's research was in Worcester not Gloucester, MA (p. 38), and the use of the first person singular made no sense in a chapter written by two authors (p. 137).

The book is divided into three sections: "Economic geography," "Globalization and contemporary capitalism," and "Regional competitive advantage." Only the first holds together as a distinct and coherent section. In contrast, chapters in the other two sections bleed messily across their respective divides.

Section I turns on economic geography's increasing fragmentation, a discipline no longer with a centre. For this reason, the title of Eric Sheppard's otherwise excellent opening essay, "The economic geography project," written in the singular, is misleading. For Sheppard's concerns are problems of multiplicity, of many economic geography projects not one. His argument is that economic geography has splintered into separate solitudes. It is now a subject populated by antagonistic tribes each living behind their particular stockade of language, sacred beliefs and taboos. Sheppard wants to break the impasse, though, to promote conversation not monologue. Drawing on the historian of science, Peter Galison, Sheppard advocates the establishment of "trading zones," and permitting exchange, communication, and gains to trade from an interactive pluralism. In this way, and in good American philosophical pragmatist fashion, economic geography would then be able to draw upon "the resources of the whole group to get us the ideas we need" (Menand, 2001, 431).

Linda McDowell's trenchant chapter, "Feminist economic geographies," argues that there is still not enough fragmentation. The centre still holds, and it is a male

bastion: “It has perhaps been in economic geography ... that the impact of feminist scholarship ... has been slowest to be felt” (p. 35). Especially problematic has been the hegemony of the “monastic, disembodied intellectual” form of inquiry (p. 34). It is this that needs to go, replaced by reflexive feminist methods in which the “everyday life” of the researcher “must also enter the story” (p. 34). Curiously missing in McDowell’s essay, however, is her own “everyday life,” the presence of which would have made her argument more compelling. Ray Hudson in “The ‘new’ economic geography?” recognises the “intellectual vibrancy” afforded by a fragmented discipline open to “interdisciplinary debate” (p. 47) but he is keen to place limits on that fragmentation. There is bad fragmentation represented by works he doesn’t like such as by Paul Krugman and J. K. Gibson-Graham, but good fragmentation represented by works that he does such as by Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift. The problem with Hudson’s position is in knowing what kinds of fragmentation might in the end turn out to be useful. Oliver Wendell Holmes’ remark is pertinent: “we should be eternally vigilant against the attempts to check the expression of opinions that we loathe” (quoted in Menand, 2001, 430). It would be too strong to say Allen Scott loathes some of the views in economic geography, but he certainly has strong opinions about a few of them (and which in the interests of disclosure include my own work), and clear in his readable chapter, “A perspective of economic geography.” In part an update of his admirable post-war history of economic geography (Scott, 2000), Scott, like Hudson, favours theoretical diversity only up to a point. He draws the line at approaches besotted with the particular, and even more so, those that deny the stubborn systematic realities of the capitalist space economy,

presuming that by thinking otherwise they will disappear. Our knowledge of capitalism has no bearing on its durability or effect. There is no end of capitalism as we know it.

The chapters in the second section, “Globalization,” were often only tangentially related to that larger theme as in Richard Walker’s humorous, occasional score-settling essay on “The education of an economic geographer,” or Anne Markusen’s “Economic geography and political economy,” in part a case study of the US military-industrial complex. Several chapters took the form of literature reviews but they could be plodding, without much sense of a larger purpose. Gordon Clark’s review of global finance, and David Angel’s of economy and environment, broke from that mould at least initially, however. Within this literature review essay genre, the most interesting chapter was by Kenney and Dossani, “Digitising services: what stays where and why.” It began with a gratuitous put down of post-structuralism (and found in several of the book’s essays – you wondered what post-structuralism had done to the various authors given the level of vitriol directed at it?). But once that was aired, Kenney and Dossani provided an interesting theoretical and empirical discussion of the centrality of transportation and telecommunications to the globalisation of services using as examples China and India.

Section III’s Heinz variety sub-title, “industrial change, human capital and public policy,” only hints at the section’s diverse assortment of topics. The authors here in comparison to those in the previous section make more of an effort in effect to do what McDowell recommends, to put themselves in their own stories, and to be explicit about their values and judgments, shunning the pretence of an anodyne objectivity. John Lovering’s “The new imperial geography” is the most extreme. It is a breathless harangue of the “Post Cultural Turn Economic Geography.” In this case there is no doubt

about what Lovering thinks is wrong with post-structuralism's incorporation into economic geography: it pushes the discipline over to the Dark Side. "Economic geography has made itself [a] ... component of the Empire of Capital" (p. 231). Other useful essays in this section include: Bjorn Asheim's "Economic geography as (regional) contexts," although disappointingly he remains mute about the explanatory link between his own Northern European regional context and the intellectual economic geographical tradition of innovation studies associated with it; Bill Beyers' "Approaching research methods in economic geography," that starts as a dull shopping list of his papers but transforms itself half way through into an affecting reflection on the practice of research; and Amy Glasmeier's "On the intersection of policy and economic geography," that combines political, disciplinary and personal history to make a passionate plea for getting "our hands dirty" (p. 217) in the grey world of policy.

In spite of its faults, the collection strikingly captures the salient features of economic geography's present incarnation: its fragmentation, its slapdash ways, its lack of agreement around methods, object of inquiry, and disciplinary boundaries. Economic geography sometimes seems a discipline careening out of control. But there is also an excitement, a grubby vitality, an intellectual openness, a willingness to experiment and to take risks. And this emerges in the chapters too. The problem for economic geography, and for this book, is to hold on to the vitality without losing the discipline.

Key words: Economic geography, fragmentation, future.

Reference

Menand, L. 2001. *The Metaphysical Club: A story of ideas in America*. New York: Farar, Straus and Giroux.

Scott, A. J. 2000. Economic geography: The great half century. *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 24: 483-504.

Cover Sheet

Trevor J Barnes

Department of Geography

1984 West Mall/

University of British Columbia

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

CANADA

Tel. 604.822.5204

Fax, 604.822.6150

E-mail, tbarnes@geog.ubc.ca