



On Theory, History, and Anoraks

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As an undergraduate I completed a joint economics and geography degree at University College London. In our arrogant, naïve, late-teenage way we used to say that we were there because the geography courses were so easy that they made us want to take classes in economics, and the economics courses were so hard that they made us want to take classes in geography. Geography was easy because it was “mere description”, and economics was hard because it involved theoretical analysis, rigorous abstraction, and staring at equations until your brain hurt. But pain was good. As our economics lecturers told us, there were no free lunches. If you wanted to be a serious thinker and relevant, you needed to suffer.

In their essay, Amin and Thrift argue that it is not only the poor students of economics who suffer its pain, but also those in kindred disciplines in the social sciences, such as economic geography, over which “the long shadow of economics” has been cast (Amin and Thrift 2000:8). Whether we like it or not, we’ve all become afflicted martyrs for the church of the dismal science. However, as Amin and Thrift argue, salvation is close at hand. For there have recently emerged “new economic knowledges ... [that] provide ... at least glimpses of some alternative worlds” (Amin and Thrift 2000:8). And these worlds are seemingly pain-free. Free lunches exist after all.

I want to make two related points about Amin and Thrift’s essay. First, they need a sharper discussion of the meaning of theory, a key term for them but one that is ill defined in their paper. Second, the triumphal ending of their article needs some historical tempering. Their paper gives one a sense that there is only one economics, which is big and bad, and that economic geographers are its “prey” (Amin and Thrift 2000:8). I argue that the story is historically more complex. This problematises their conclusion, in which the real economic

geography finally emerges, “standing on [its] own terms” (Amin and Thrift 2000:8).

The pivot on which Amin and Thrift’s paper turns is the contrast between two different definitions of theory, each of which produces a specific type of economic geographical practice and vision of the discipline (as seen in the very title of Amin and Thrift’s paper). Given their importance within the architecture of the article, neither of the definitions is especially clear.

The first kind of theory they recognise is “formal economics” (Amin and Thrift 2000:5). Given their characterization of it as “rigorous”, “well defined”, and “confident” (Amin and Thrift 2000:5), this seems like some version of neoclassicism (although this is a term they never use). Furthermore—also a hallmark of neoclassicism—it is an approach that explains the economic on the basis of variables that are themselves strictly economic. I was never certain from their paper, however, exactly what they have against neoclassical economics, although clearly there is something. The reasons they give in the paper do not seem sufficient given the intensity of their critique. They talk about economic geographers no longer having the skills to use formal economic theory. Surely, however, that is the economic geographer’s problem and not that of formal theory per se. They also talk about “theorization [a]s no longer the sole preserve of economics” (Amin and Thrift 2000:5). Again, that might be true, but it does not necessarily undermine the continued use of formal theory.

I think their argument would have been more compelling, and would have justified their level of criticism, had they attacked the wider theoretical tradition of which neoclassicism is part. To do so, though, first requires delineating that wider tradition, and this they never do. Here some of the methodological writings carried out in economics during the late 1980s and early 1990s would have been useful (see, in particular, Mirowski 1989). Such works characterize neoclassical economics as suffering from a case of physics envy, and as a result adopting a definition of theory found within the hard sciences. Consequently, economic theory is characterized by the belief in the impeccable logic of mathematics, the assertion of a theoretical reductionism to essential entities, and the contention that theories mirror the world. These features, which entered economic geography during the late 1950s and early 1960s when it too yearned to be like physics, are all problematic, as various recent writings in social theory have made clear. I contend that setting out these general problematic features, which would necessarily involve clarifying neoclassicism’s theoretical character, would have been a more effective critical

strategy than the one Amin and Thrift pursue. As it stands, their new theory never quite engages the old one: they are like ships passing in the night.

The flip side of Amin and Thrift's critique is their theoretical reconstruction. I am very sympathetic to their wider project and to the analysis they provide in their two illustrations (Amin and Thrift 2000:6–8). That said, again, I think a more explicit statement about the nature of the theory that they are advocating would have strengthened their argument. It seems to me that the very meaning of theory is changing in economic geography, prompted in part by just such works as Amin and Thrift's. They are engaged in the wider project of rethinking theory itself. However, in this piece they say very little about what that rethinking involves. My interpretation is that some economic geographers are moving away from the old meaning of theory defined as a set of formerly connected statements, the end point of which is explanation of an independent world, to a definition that is much looser. Useful, at least for me, in understanding this new theoretical "looseness" is the work of the literary theorist Jonathan Culler (1997). Culler argues that theory should be defined as the redescription of the world in terms of novel vocabularies (1997). For example, theoretical works are generated when the ideas, concepts, metaphors, and explanations of one discipline are used to understand the substantive material of another. In this view, theoretical works are those that "*have effects beyond their original field*" (Culler 1997:3; emphasis in original). For economic geographers, this means that to be theoretical they need to rely on works outside of the traditional canon of economics. As a disciplinary practice, this is exactly what Amin and Thrift aver. I argue that this important substantive point could be made into a wider theoretical one of the kind that Culler suggests. In this sense, an opportunity for theoretical elaboration is lost in Amin and Thrift's article.

In sum, although Amin and Thrift couch their argument in terms of a choice between two different theoretical traditions—the bad economic theory of the past and the good economic theory that is to come—their account of those theoretical traditions is weak. This does not take away from the importance of their argument, but it makes it less convincing, which is unfortunate.

My second general comment on the paper is its lack of a historical sensibility. There is a sense in the paper that economics and economic geography have always been in the same theoretical relationship to one another, but this is not true. The very definitions of economics and economic geography have changed substantially over the last

hundred years, as has their relationship. As a result, Amin and Thrift's conclusion, in which the "true" nature of economic geography is finally realised, must be mythic—the equivalent of saying, "And they all lived happily ever after."

Let me elaborate. It is hard to put an exact date on the institutionalisation of economic geography as an academic discipline, but almost from its inception economic geographers have been in a fraught relationship to economists over precisely the issue of theory. George G. Chisholm, the Scottish geographer and author of perhaps the first English-language textbook in economic geography, *Handbook of Commercial Geography* (1889), once said in a hyperbolic moment that he "wish[ed] ... th[e] love of pure theory to the devil" (quoted in Wise 1975:2). The context was Chisholm's reading in German Alfred Weber's *Über den Standort der Industrien* (1909). Chisholm favoured an approach that emphasised "variations connected with place" (1908:568). More broadly, Chisholm's project was always sharply delineated from that of economists. The opening sentence of *Handbook of Commercial Geography* reads, "The great geographical fact on which commerce depends is that different parts of the world yield different products, or furnish products under unequally favourable conditions" (Chisholm 1889:1). He always searched tirelessly for those great geographical facts, rather than speculating abstractly about them. For him the latter task was the domain of economists such as Ricardo or Mill, whereas his task was to labour in the salt mines of the gazetteer, statistical table, and large-scale map. (Chisholm once said, "if ... there is some drudgery in the learning of geography, I see no harm in it" [quoted in MacLean 1988:25].)

The point is that early economic geographers, such as Chisholm and, later, his American equivalent, J. Russell Smith, were not kowtowing to economists but were trying to invent their own distinct discipline. Such a project continued at least through to the Second World War. For example, Richard Hartshorne's *The Nature of Geography* (1939), which was rooted in economic geographical concerns (Barnes 2000), is explicit in turning its back on the methodological approach of the social sciences such as economics. One might not like Hartshorne's resulting regionalist vision, but no one could accuse it of being a clone of economics.

The relation between economics and economic geography only changes in the late 1950s when economic geographers systematically explored and applied economic theories, techniques, and methods for the first time. However, even here geographers were not looking only to economists but also to physicists, sociologists, and mathematicians.

It was also during this period that economic geography became involved with regional science and led by the Harvard-trained economist Walter Isard. It is in economic geography's collaborations with regional science, which were both intellectual and personal (for example, Duane Marble, Michael Dacey, Allen Scott, and John Paar all held appointments at the Regional Science Department, University of Pennsylvania, which Isard founded), that economic geography comes closest to Amin and Thrift's depiction of a discipline dominated by economics. However, it didn't last. There were always internal tensions between regional scientists and economic geographers over who were the "real" theorists. Isard's view, which rankled even his supporters, was that economic geographers were simply hewers and drawers of data. Later, external tensions arose when geography went "relevant" and "radical" in the early 1970s. Then economic geographers began rejecting the model of regional science altogether, and consequently that of economics, too. There have been flurries of reinterest in economic theory since the early 1970s, such as in analytical approaches to political economy, and most recently in Paul Krugman's work, but none have caught on. It is possible that the new *Journal of Economic Geography*, the mandate of which is to forge links between economists and geographers, will rekindle an interest in formal theory, but the trajectory of the discipline is not in that direction.

In spite of the lack of detail in this postage-stamp history, I hope the wider point is clear: that economic geography has taken on a variety of forms, and a variety of relationships with economics, over the hundred years that it has formally existed. During that period, economic geography continually invented and reinvented itself: from commercial geography to regional economic description to spatial science to regional political economy to the "cultural turn". During some of these shifts, there was a close relationship between the discipline and orthodox economics and its associated brand of theory. For most of its history, however, no such relationship existed; if anything, the relation was cool and distant. The historical record does not evidence the kind of predatory role that Amin and Thrift accord economic theory within economic geography.

There is one last issue. Being historically sensitive to changes occurring in the discipline gives the lie to the idea that there is some final, real version of economic geography ready to emerge. However, it is with precisely this notion that Amin and Thrift conclude their paper, with talk of economic geographers "standing on [their] own terms" (Amin and Thrift 2000:8). Instead, economic geographers

have always been in an “awkward corner”, to use Joan Robinson’s phrase, open to change and resisting some final resolution and definition (1966:7). It was ultimately this quality, I think, that persuaded me at the end of my undergraduate degree to be an economic geographer rather than an economist. But then, I did also love my blue anorak.

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