Situating economic geographical teaching

Trevor J. Barnes,

Department of Geography,

University of British Columbia,

Vancouver,

BC V6T 1Z2,

CANADA

E-mail: tbarnes@geog.ubc.ca

Abstract

The paper makes an argument for an economic geographical pedagogy that is post-disciplinary, emphasizing non-hierarchical, student-based knowledge, disciplinary interconnectedness, epistemological plurality, and material embodiedness and embeddedness. Key to this conception of economic geographical pedagogy are recent writings of Timothy Mitchell and especially Donna Haraway. The paper discusses several projects and exercises that the author has employed in his economic geography course to exemplify, and to persuade students of the merits of, a post-disciplinary approach to the subject

Keywords: post-disciplinary, student knowledge, plurality, embodiedness

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I got off on the wrong track in teaching economic geography right from the beginning. As a first year Assistant Professor at the University of British Columbia (UBC), I was assigned to team-teach the class – Geography 201, Geography of Economic Activities – with two others. While the team organiser, a former Second World War RAF officer, was generous and kind, he was a strong believer in discipline and order. There were three of us, three economic sectors, three sections of the course. It was obvious: first third, him, primary sector; second third, Bob, secondary sector; final third, me, tertiary sector. And so, the structure of UBC's economic geography course was regimented.

As a disciplinary template, it continued to discipline me even after our course organiser retired. Foucault (1986, 46) says the struggle to overthrow an order reproduces another form of that same order. Likewise, as much as I schemed to develop a different scheme the less different it became. There are many reasons, but one, I think, is the very intellectual orderliness of economic geography as a nineteenth century social science discipline. As Timothy Mitchell (2002, 2) puts it, that orderliness "le[aves] us heading into the twenty-first century as captives of nineteenth century thought." It forms an iron-cage, confining intellectual thought and styles of teaching. No wonder it was so difficult to escape.

One of our pedagogical tasks I now believe, though, is to disrupt that orderliness, to bring the subject along with other social sciences into the 21st century. This is prompted especially by arguments found within a set of what I will call post-disciplines that include science studies, feminism, cultural studies, post-colonial studies, and post-Marxism. While each of these bodies of inquiry are quite different, they are unified in breaking down traditional 19th century disciplinary boundaries, smudging borders, muddying purity. All of them have been tried out in

economic geography, pointing to a different kind of discipline, a different kind of pedagogy. It is not discipline and order, but messiness and impurity. In hesitant and ad hoc ways, I've tried to disrupt economic geography's disciplined and ordered pedagogy in my own course, to make it post-disciplinary. It has been a struggle, both for me and even more so for my students. In their evaluations, they complain that they expected to do economic geography in my class not sociology, or political science, or Aboriginal studies; they expected precise answers not untidy questions. I am sympathetic. When I was an undergraduate, I too wanted truth, clarity, and certainty. I tell them that they will grow out of it. They are sceptical, though, and resent the condescension (as I would have). Certainly, my retired colleague never grew out of it. To go against the grain of one's training, the very idea of a discipline, is difficult and unsettling. C. S. Lewis said that his conversion to Christianity felt like being dragged through a hedge backwards. I feel the same way in my conversion to the undisciplined and disordered teaching of economic geography.

Such conversion is important, though, and compellingly argued in Donna Haraway's (1991) well-known essay about situated knowledges, a manifesto for post-disciplinarity. Haraway embodies the very post-disciplinarity she advocates. Trained as a zoologist, teaching in a programme on the history of consciousness, her writings straddle and intermix feminism, political economy, science, social and cultural history, and technology. Throughout is a deep commitment to cross boundaries, and which for her is necessary to spark intellectual creativity and to produce political empowerment. Thinking only inside existing disciplinary boxes obscures vital connections, lines of flight, and chains of translation that lie outside. Moreover, the orderliness and purity found inside can produce dogma and intolerance, and sometimes much worse (Bauman, 1989, brilliantly discusses the 'much worse'). It is for this reason that Haraway

(1991: 81) says, “I would rather be a cyborg than a Goddess.” A cyborg by its very nature crosses categories that in the past were kept separate (just like academic disciplines), opening up new spaces for thinking and speaking. Haraway’s project of situated knowledges (cyborg knowledges), in contrast, emphasises non-hierarchy, interconnection, plurality, and material embeddedness and embodiedness. Taking these terms in order, I will say something about how each is represented in my teaching of a post-disciplinary economic geography.

By non-hierarchy, I mean the idea that everyone is a potential expert, or at least possesses knowledge about the economy and geography from which everyone in the class can learn (especially me). This moves away from the talking head, rule-of-expert model in which “I know economic geography and you don’t.” Apart from the intellectual arrogance of this position, it rests on precisely the kind of assertion of authority that Haraway (1991) and Mitchell (2002) believe has been so pernicious over the twentieth century. In contrast, under a non-hierarchical approach what counts, and who can possess, legitimate economic geographical knowledge is inclusive and expansive.

To show that students themselves possess “expert” economic geographical knowledge I work through two exercises. The first is a project around work. Many of the students I teach are employed at least part time. I have them write and talk about their labouring, and which over the years has yielded gripping, sad, funny, and always economic geographically relevant stories. The class and I have heard first hand about: sweated labour practices in the making of swimming goggles in a Vancouver suburban factory; Taylorist work forms at a Vancouver eastside McDonalds; and barista performances at a Starbucks on Vancouver’s Westside. Not only does the class gain from these stories of situated economically geographical knowledge, but also the

students who tell them gain a stake in the discipline. Economic geography is not about other people. It is about them. It is their stories. They are experts.

The second exercise I've taken from Ian Cook (Cook et al., 2004). In his class, he incorporates and builds upon his Birmingham students' expertise in consuming goods. Cook asks them to use commodity chain analysis to deepen their knowledge of the economic geography of their retail purchases. A mobile (cell) phone bought at Birmingham's Bullring connects to coltan mines in the Congo (and disappearing gorillas), to mineral processing plants in Kazakhstan (and privatisation), and to a Nokia factory in Dongguan in Guang Dong Province, SE China (and massive urban development, severe environmental problems, and the rural-urban migration of young women working for a dollar a day; Cook et al., 2004, 15-17). The larger point is to encourage students to see themselves as participating directly in the economic geographical processes they study. They are not mere passive observers, but are part of the story, embodying the skill, capability, and knowledge to understand reflexively their own role within the larger economic geographical system (here there are linkages to Nancy Ettlinger's project in her course that uses Gibson-Graham's work).

Notions of interconnection, of crossing boundaries, are central to postdisciplinarity. As an idea, it is the antonym of economic geography as order, and signified by the original tripartite division of labour found in that first economic geography course I taught. Instead, my strategy is to find cyborg case studies that crosscut, interleave, and disrupt ordered boundaries including those found within economic geography and outside of it. Such studies bleed and leak across categories, across disciplines.

In my own class, I use the example of the Ur punk band the Sex Pistols as an opening shot in thinking about a cyborg economic geography (discussed in Barnes, 2005). Are the Sex

Pistols a cultural or economic phenomenon? Are they an intangible or material good? Are they manufacturers or service providers? Are they exploited workers (under "boss" Malcolm McLaren) or exploiters of a manipulated youth market? And are they a completely new product (John Peel said you had "the feeling … that [they] had come from another planet," quoted in Marcus 1989, 41) or just another branded logo? It is an extreme example, but it makes the point. And once the point is made, the cyborg nature of many economic geographical topics is readily seen. Forestry, an industry very large in my province, certainly escapes narrow disciplinary confinement, and which I am keen to illustrate in cyborg fashion in my course. Within no time, we're on to Aboriginal treaty claims, Canada Supreme Court legal decisions, political forms of governance, deep ecology, and the life cycle of the mountain pine beetle. And that's only the introduction. Talk about bleeding and leaking. The larger pedagogical task is to encourage students to locate their own cyborg economic geographies, examples that fall betwixt and between traditional categories. This necessitates locating connections not separations, traversing borders not erecting them, defiling not sanitising. The task is to remind student that what we study often escapes simple disciplinary demarcations. This should not cause us to stop and retreat but spur us onward to transgression.

Plurality is key to a post-discipline economic geography. It is the idea that there is never a single approach to understanding economic geography, and that economic geography doesn't come in a single form. Economic geography comes in all shapes and sizes, and not in just three economic sectors. I would be a rich man if I received a dollar for every time a student said to me, "I never thought this is economic geography." That's why I play the Sex Pistols and Bruce Springstein in my classes, and show clips from the movies The Full Monty and Billy Elliott. They push students to think differently about economic geography. Economic geography is as

relevant to understanding male strippers in Sheffield (The Full Monty), as it is to comprehending the lyrics of Bruce Springstein's "Tom Joad" CD. Rather than see the subject matter of economic geography as cordoned off, existing as small discrete topics (agricultural land rent, manufacturing location, the range and threshold of a good), I press my students to look for it everywhere, to find it in areas they would not imagine it to be found. They are sometimes surprised by their findings. But surprise is another name for what doesn't fit expectations, and the point of my prodding.

Pluralism also extends to methodology; that one approach never captures everything. I find conveying methodological pluralism the most difficult pedagogical task I undertake, harder than explaining even derivatives or Nigel Thrift's (2000) performative theory of high-end service sector activities. Either it ends up with students begging me to tell them which approach is right so they can use it in their essays to increase their marks. Or, because I present the different methodological approaches historically, they presume that the most recent one I talk about, the "cultural turn," is best, and which they believe I would have mentioned if only the class bell had not rung.

Material embodiedness and embeddedness are central to Haraway's project. She thinks that partly what makes the world so messy, and our understanding of it so partial, is its assorted materiality and the sundry physical bodies that we inhabit. Post-disciplinarity copes with such messiness and partiality by beginning in the thick of things, with the recognition of variegated material agency and diverse corporeality.

In the past, economic geography as an ordered body of inquiry often omitted diverse bodies, and the unevenness of matter. Different bodies were presented as versions of the same faceless agent, and different materials were reduced to some mathematical common denominator

such as numbers in a table, geometrical points on a figure, or the slope of a line on a graph. In the post-disciplinary literature, however, there is an attempt to recoup both varied bodies and assorted material objects. They are not to be flattened, ground into homogeneity, but kept in tact. Their intactness and difference don't obstruct or pervert the economic geographical story. They are the story.

The students begin to recognise this in their own studies of work and consumption. It becomes quickly apparent that the kinds of bodies they occupy shape the kinds of jobs that they undertake, and that their bodies matter differently in different jobs. Making swimming goggles on an assembly line in Richmond uses the body quite differently from performing cappuccino making in Starbucks on Vancouver's West Side. And this is point is buttressed by an increasingly large and readable literature turning on the critical importance of different kinds of bodies for different kinds of jobs, for example, on female domestic workers (Pratt, 1999), or male car labourers (Leslie and Butz, 1998), or female merchant bankers (McDowell, 1987). Likewise, the miscellaneous materiality of things becomes clear when the students undertake their commodity chain analysis. For it involves following physical goods around, stalking them, watching them as they are materially constructed one bit at a time. There is no mistaking their physicality. You stare it in the face (Hughes and Reimer, 2004).

I find teaching difficult. I have to resist, not always successfully, the easy option of recycling old lecture notes, which given my age and experience are notes from another era. But economic geography has altered remarkably over the last decade or so, taking up and riffing on ideas from post-disciplinary literatures, and in doing so breaking its old rationalist, masculinist mould. The central pedagogical task is to find the means to teach our students an economic

geography intellectually appropriate to the 21st century and not that of a previous age, either my former course team leader's or my own.

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