

## **Economic Geography Under Postcolonial Scrutiny**

Because the economy is not found as an empirical object among other worldly things, in order for it to be 'seen' by the human perceptual apparatus it has to undergo a process, crucial for science, of representational mapping. This is doubling, but with a difference; the map shifts the point of view so that viewers can see the whole as if from the outside, in a way that allows them, from a specific position inside, to find their bearings (Buck-Morss 1995: 440).

### **1: Introduction**

It is no longer controversial to assert that the 'mainstream' of economic-geographical theorising, including that which defines itself as 'international', emerges from the experiences of Anglo-American regions and is articulated largely in the pages of 'major international journals', published overwhelmingly in English in the UK and USA (see Foster *et al.* 2007, Murphy 2008, Rodriguez-Pose 2006, Yeung and Lin 2003). However, what is remarkable is that so much economic geography continues to presume that 'the economy' can and should be theorised solely from the perspective of the formal spaces of western economies.

This brief intervention seeks to build on work which identifies and measures the Anglo-centrism of economic geography (Rodriguez-Pose 2006) and explores the limits of such economic-geographical research (see, for example, Pollard and Samers 2007) in an attempt to foster what we regard as a long-overdue dialogue between economic geographers and scholars working with postcolonial approaches, broadly defined. It arises from our ongoing conversations, reflecting the differing theoretical perspectives and geographical contexts of our research, and from a two year ESRC-funded seminar series<sup>1</sup>,

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which sought to explore the potential for, and challenges of, a postcolonial economic geography.

## **2: Boundary Crossings**

One of the attractions of postcolonial approaches is the determined attempt to work across boundaries and make critical connections between apparently disparate events and experiences. As a group of geographers interested, in different ways,<sup>2</sup> in 'the economy', we are all drawn to boundary crossing for a number of reasons. First, we have long been frustrated by intellectual and disciplinary practices that separate those of us researching economic issues in 'the global South' and post-socialist contexts from those researching similar issues in 'western' capitalist economies. There is still some mutual apathy towards or even dismissiveness amongst geographers researching in different parts of the world (see Jones 2000). This is despite the fact that concentrations of poverty in the North and wealth in the South pose significant challenges to the predominant tendency amongst academics and policy-makers to compartmentalise in spatial terms. Moreover, while studies of transnational and ethical trade, neoliberalism, Islamic finance, household economies and commodity chains incorporate a multitude of case studies covering the global South and post-socialist spaces, these tend to be understood through conceptual lenses that almost always have antecedents in western theorisations. Second, while there have been important contributions to 're-thinking the economy' in economic geography (notably Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006, Lee 2006, and Massey 1999, 2004), often borrowing from earlier critiques within feminist theory and development studies, the uptake of these ideas across geography has been partial and uneven. Although feminist and postcolonial geographers continue to produce a rich literature on economic concerns, such as social capital, neoliberalisation, diverse economies, class identities, and so forth (Bondi and Laurie 2005, Gibson-Graham

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<sup>2</sup> Some of us would be seen unproblematically as 'economic geographers', while others have variously been referred to as 'post-socialist' or 'development' geographers and/or area specialists.

2006, Larner and Craig 2005, Larner 2005, McEwan *et al.* 2005, Radcliffe 2005, Staeheli *et al.* 2004, Wright 2006), this work is seldom taken up by other economic geographers in their theorisations of the economy. Similarly, postcolonialism has made few inroads into the discipline of economics (though see Zein-Alabdin and Charusheela 2004). On one side, economics – in its most orthodox neoclassical variants – assumes the ontological precedence of modern European societies (*ibid.*), while on the other, significant concerns remain in relation to what Hall (1996) described as the ‘disavowal’ of economy in much postcolonial theorising. While the economy is present in some postcolonial theory and politics (for example, Spivak’s (1988) ruminations on the global division of labour), explicit theorisation of the economic is rare and tends to remain rooted in variants of dependency or world systems theory. Third, we share a growing concern with how we research ethically and responsibly in a global world. Although the context of globalisation demands that different parts of the world are incorporated into economic geographies, we ask what are the politics – personal and professional – of economic geographers parachuting into new and unfamiliar terrain armed with little understanding of the specificities of ‘other’ places and with only their western theoretical toolkits?

These shared concerns have encouraged us to consider a broader question, namely what might postcolonial approaches do to economic geography? As we have suggested, our moves to ‘postcolonialise’ economic geography rest heavily on other theoretical engagements. These approaches – inspired by queer theory, poststructuralism, post-development, post-socialism, feminism and postcolonialism – have challenged the way we research and theorise the economic. They do so by exploring the geographical construction and performance of ‘the economy’, and by envisioning the ‘whole economy’ and the articulations between ‘the economy’ and its others. While Marxism’s indifference to difference has been ‘meticulously exposed by postmodern, poststructuralist, and postcolonial critics’ (Castree 1996/7: 45), a postcolonial perspective pushes us to go further

than traditional geographies of the Left which, though often sympathetic to the needs and experiences of the subaltern, tend to focus on systemic critiques of capitalism and analyses of the formal spaces of labour, to the detriment of vivid, complex and embodied accounts of lives and livelihoods. In what follows, we focus on developing a dialogue between postcolonialism and economic geography whilst recognising the need to maintain and further develop a dialogue about the importance of the economy in postcolonial geographies.

### **3: The geographies of economic knowledge and the making of 'elsewhere'**

A conversation between economic geography and postcolonialism should interrogate the geographies of knowledge production about 'the economy'. Postcolonialising economic geography is a political project that works against a divisive geopolitics of knowledge. Many economic geographers still unconsciously universalise the western parochial, and thus 'non'-western economies are seen in terms of 'a lack, an absence, an incompleteness that translates into an 'inadequacy'' (Chakrabarty 2000: 32) or, at best, something reduced to 'varieties of capitalism'. A postcolonial economic geography offers a counter to such visions in a number of ways, for example by recognising the multiplicity of worlds that may or may not see themselves as economic in these terms. These may include indigenous forms of knowledge (Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2006) and the ordinary economies of everyday life (Lee 2006).

Postcolonial economic geography makes a call to examine how and where economic practices and theories travel (Larner and Laurie forthcoming) and emphasises the importance of exploring the 'domestication'<sup>3</sup> (Stenning and Smith 2008; Smith and Rochovská 2007) of projects, policies and target groups. The growing body of work that

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<sup>3</sup> Domestication here is used in both a national and household sense. In both settings economic theories and practices are internalised, reproduced and scaled in ways that reflect dominant assumptions about places, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class.

explores the development industry through institutional and embodied ethnographies is a good illustration of this approach, often drawing inspiration from work that sees economic policies as technocratic projects (Mitchell 2002, Goldman 2005). Although there has been work on, for example, how neoliberalism travels (Peck 2004), much of this has explored the circulation of knowledges within advanced economies and the movement of such knowledges *out from* the west. Less work has drawn attention to the travels of economic policy made elsewhere (Smith, Stenning and Willis forthcoming). Certainly not enough analysis of how neoliberalism travels has acknowledged the ways in which indigenous actors have responded to and remade economic policy. In contrast, postcolonial critiques reveal the ways in which parallel policy-making circuits have long operated simultaneously but separately, structuring the geographies of learning along clearly defined North-South lines. Thus, for example, the development of British workfare<sup>4</sup> did not benefit from knowledge sharing about contemporaneous experiences in the global South, despite the role of international organisations like the ILO in charting and disseminating their successes (Laurie 2007).

We argue that there is a lopsided acknowledgement of, and interest in, the movement of knowledge in economic geography. While economic geographers in Anglophone contexts sometimes explore flows of knowledge from the west, they do little to interrogate the impact of such knowledges 'elsewhere', and thus rarely engage with the extensive work of development and post-socialist geographers. Moreover, despite rich ethnographic and anthropological work documenting indigenous and alternative community economies around the globe, relatively few economic geographers have examined flows

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<sup>4</sup> British workfare was introduced as part of the wide-ranging welfare reforms of the 1990s in the UK. It made social security benefits dependent on individual's take up of government employment schemes. Welfare-to-work programmes in the UK and the USA have been studied by geographers as early examples of welfare policy transfer (see Peck and Theodore 2001).

that emanate from non-western and other subaltern settings, or from regions not defined as 'advanced capitalist economies'.

#### **4. Doing postcolonial economic geographies**

An emphasis on diversities must be scrutinized to ensure that we do not miss 'the wood' because we see too many 'trees'. With this in mind a sympathetic critique is offered by Roger Lee, who draws our attention to the singularity of economy – the need to enable social and material reproduction, that is the need for any economic geography to be 'life-sustaining' (Lee, 2006). Lee concedes, of course, that sustaining life is not simply a question of material success but also of the performance of other values. Therefore, rather than abandoning western economic models, the challenge is, as Spivak (1988: 57) argues, to 'produce a reading which is politically more useful, rather than a reading that would simply throw away an extremely powerful analysis because it can be given a certain kind of reading'. An emphasis on subalterity within postcolonial approaches inspires analyses not just of the iniquities of capitalism but also of other forms of oppression such as patriarchy, neo-colonialism and racism (McCall 2005), which intersect to shape the identities and life chances of diverse groups of people. An emphasis on the ruptures, cracks, crevices and happenstance of economies does not equate with contingency and 'splitting'. Rather, it serves to clarify the mechanisms and power relations in play that permit particular forms of representation to take shape, circulate and become 'domesticated'. There is political importance to the consideration of difference in this approach; this is not about difference for its own sake, but to counter 'the discursive erasure threatened by neoliberal theory' (Gibson-Graham 2008: 8).

Our insistence on a recognition of more complex and multi-directional flows of economic knowledge and policy leads us to argue that postcolonialising economic geography is not confined to an engagement with the more obviously postcolonial worlds of

diasporic communities and the global South. Nor are we suggesting that it is only those who work in area studies who can practice a postcolonial economic geography. Far from it. The postcolonial economic geography we advocate is not a geography of 'the South', but an economic geography more conscious of its own perspectives and more open to embracing different perspectives through which to view economic practices. It is as important to turn these perspectives on the North to disruptive effect as it is to break the silences from the margins (see Pollard and Samers 2007).

### ***Quirky case studies***

Such validation of other economies reinforces the importance of what are often seen as 'quirky case studies'<sup>5</sup>. Many of us who work beyond the spaces of mainstream economic geography are regularly called upon to justify our focus on what are seen as marginal practices and spaces. Yet these practices and spaces are often illustrative of widespread and 'popular' economies of everyday importance. This marginalisation of widespread economic practices echoes Robinson's (2003: 278) concern with the way in which research findings in 'different contexts' are often incorporated as add-on 'case studies' to interpret or affirm western knowledge, whilst work in the 'heartlands' is seen 'as generative of theoretical and general geographical knowledge'. A postcolonial economic geography might, in contrast, seek out those case studies which contradict what would seem to be a 'logical economic' outcome, or those which 'queer' the interpretations of economic practices elsewhere, reflecting varying motivations and values.

### ***Area studies with a difference?***

These concerns encourage us to reconsider the place of area studies in economic geography. As Robinson suggests, area studies has been 'one of the few serious

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<sup>5</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Wendy Larner (2006).

counterweights to the tireless tendency to marginalise huge parts of the world' (Appadurai 1996, cited in Robinson 2003: 280). And as Rigg (2007) suggests, there is an ongoing need to question the apparent (and increasing) parochialism of Anglophone geography. This is not a plea for a return to the problematic, bounded areas studies in which unequal North-South and East-West power relations went unacknowledged. Rather, it is a concern to open economic geographies to the postcolonialising possibilities of area studies. These possibilities, we suggest, are threefold. First, area studies equips academics with the skills – including but not limited to language – and experience to explore the articulation of the local and the global, and to develop and analyse case studies, which rest on detailed engagements with the region or country of study. Second, it creates an interdisciplinary arena for analysis. For example, any Latin American or Russian and East European studies conference draws in film critics, linguists, social scientists, historians and, increasingly, engineers and scientists to debate and explore the region's engagements with global economies. Finally, research practice in area studies habitually engages with activists and policy-makers able to deploy academic research within their policy and practice. The ways in which research 'gets done' in area studies settings often blurs the boundaries between users and producers of knowledge. It also has the potential to employ a broader conception of where expertise resides through its emphasis on transnational team-building, dialogue and equitable forms of knowledge exchange.

### ***Doing collaboration***

These possibilities suggest a practice of collaborative research that crosses boundaries – between academic disciplines and geographical subdisciplines, between states and regions and between academic work and other forms of activism. This commitment to dialogue and collaborative research probably comes closest to meeting the ethical concerns of postcolonialism (McEwan 2008), but requires a radical opening up of the research process.

Without this, there is a danger of appropriating the experiences and knowledges of peoples in the South without radically altering the power relations that structure knowledge production: 'the experiences of the marginalized are used in the West, but without opening up the *process* to their knowledges, theories and explanations' (Briggs and Sharp 2004: 664). Postcolonial practice requires holding in tension the mutual constitution of the North and South and the importance of each for the other's theorizations, while also acknowledging and accepting that the South is not entirely constituted by the North (Raghuram and Madge 2006).

This also has implications for teaching economic geography. There are signs that the problematic geopolitics of knowledge (Jones 2000) are being addressed in the production of undergraduate and postgraduate curricula as new courses seek to internationalize, drawing on examples from North, South, East and West. There are, of course, different ways in which this can be done, some of which are problematic. For example, economic geographies should avoid the 'scholar-as-tourist' model (Mohanty 2002: 518-24), in which brief forays into the South are subject to a Eurocentric gaze. Similarly, they should avoid the 'scholar-as-explorer' model (*ibid.*) in which the foreign other is the object and subject of knowledge. Instead, internationalising in a postcolonial sense could involve adopting a comparative, solidarity-based model (*ibid.*), premised on the idea that the local and global exist simultaneously and constitute each other. This foregrounds the material, conceptual and temporal links and relationships between places, and assumes a comparative focus.

Finally, debates about postcolonial practice inevitably return us to some familiar and, perhaps, uncomfortable questions about the geopolitics of academic knowledge production, what 'counts' (in UK Research Assessment Exercise parlance) as 'original, significant and rigorous research', and specific institutional understandings of what constitutes 'international' significance (Rodriguez-Pose 2006). As with longstanding debates about geographers and policy-relevance (Martin 2001), what we posit as postcolonial

practice may sit uneasily with institutional forms of evaluation that prioritise specific kinds of research.

## **5: Concluding thoughts**

It is often assumed that there is a mutual antipathy between postcolonial approaches and economic theory. Yet we have suggested that there is already dialogue between economic concerns and postcolonial geographies, most especially in feminism and development studies. This commentary has highlighted the need for another boundary-crossing, one that can facilitate dialogue between economic geographers and others using postcolonial approaches to explore economic issues. We are advocating an agenda that enables economic geography to cross boundaries in more innovative and globally equitable ways. We have highlighted how current geographies of economic knowledge are limited because they fail to prioritise the need to seek out and reflect on economic outcomes and quirky case studies that 'queer' mainstream interpretations of economic practices. We have also outlined three ways to open up economic geographies to the postcolonialising possibilities of area studies.

Our discussion in this paper, however, is *not* intended as a relativising gesture, one that is simply about recognising the 'situatedness' of western (economic) knowledges. Neither is it an evangelising mission to turn everyone into area specialists or development geographers. While we confess to a sideways plea for humility in approaching case studies outside one's primary area of expertise, we are mainly concerned with supporting an on-going call for 'provincialising' (Chakrabarty 2000) the specificity of the putatively universal language, categories and tools of economic geography. This we would argue is essential if different ways of thinking, writing and talking about economic inequality are the desired outcome.

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