Economic Geography

Past, present and future

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8 The education of an economic geographer

Richard Walker

Rather than engage the entire field of economic geography over the last quarter century, I would like to reflect on my own pathway through the discipline. I hope this won't be seen as an indulgence, but as a way of putting flesh and blood on an epoch. But how to track a career? We all construct and edit continuously the narrative of our lives, seeking some semblance of order and justification for our motley existence. My course has zigzagged through several areas that, while not exactly a random walk, nonetheless presents some difficulties in drawing a neat trajectory line. The work of a life may not be wholly coherent, but still manifests certain principles of being a geographer and social scientist. An evident difficulty is that I am not simply an economic geographer. Still, there has been a long-standing commitment to political economy that has shaped everything along the way.

My undergraduate degree in economics was actually an accident since I had started out my course work concentrating in sciences, math and engineering. I still adhere to a scientific ideal for rational inquiry and explanation of the world, despite everything learned in the meantime about the frailties and fallacies of the scientific enterprise and about the role of mind, morality and human nature of science. The accident of economics turned into a devotion under the influence of a few teachers, most notably Joan Robinson, who came to Stanford at the behest of the student government in 1969. Robinson made the study of economics seem vital, as well as critical of the existing order (though what was wrong with conventional theory I still could not quite make out). I even started graduate school in Economics at Stanford, before quitting in disgust at the absurdity of the neo-classicism being drilled into us. That wariness about mainstream economics warned me from early on that economics is never enough. To Economic Geographers, I say we have to be in constant dialogue with other fields and problems, whether environmental, political, or sociological. We are always grappling with complex social systems. While the study of economics is a necessity in a capitalist world, it is never sufficient.

From that abortive beginning as an economist, I went searching the college catalogs for Environmental Studies programs (there were effectively none at the time) and stumbled upon the newly minted Geography and Environmental Engineering Department at Johns Hopkins University. When I arrived at

Hopkins in 1971, I hoped to pursue some kind of resource economics program. That misbegotten notion faded under the influence of David Harvey and Reds Wolman, who opened my eyes to the broader horizons of geography. Although David is seen as a Marxist above all, he was deeply steeped in British Geography and managed to transmit that affection to me without any formal drills. Harvey also introduced me to Marx's *Capital*, which we struggled through together. My economics and economic geography are still inescapably Marxist, though always open to extension and hybridization. After all, I was a Green before I was a Red. This may be why I am not usually cited as a classic Marxist Geographer like Harvey or his later student, Neil Smith.

I came to geography as an environmentalist owing to the influences of my youth in the Bay Area, a hearth of American environmentalism in the 1950s and 1960s. At Hopkins, my first piece of serious research was on a woeful reclamation project in Nebraska (which helped in its defeat) and the misuse of benefit-cost analysis to justify dams. The first iteration of my dissertation was an inquiry into the National Land Use Control Act, then under consideration by Congress (which spoke to my keen sense of personal loss in the paving of Silicon Valley, where I grew up). When the Act died and my draft proved boring, Harvey suggested I expand the first chapter, a history of suburbanization, into the whole thing.

When I went out on the job market in 1975, I was hired to teach environmental courses, not economic ones. The Chair at Berkeley, David Hooson, told me it would be the kiss of death among his colleagues to talk about economies or cities, so my job talk was on wetlands on the Chesapeake Bay, another project from graduate school. After being hired at Berkeley, I taught such courses as Water Resources, Open Space, and Population and Natural Resources. In those years, I wrote about the Clean Air Act, water projects in California, a Dow Chemical petrochemical complex, the logic of industrial pollution, and land use controls – all of which had an important element of economic analysis to them. Unfortunately, I bolted from environmental studies before the field took off. A wrong turn, perhaps, but it would lead me to economic geography.

My dissertation, The Suburban Solution (1977), had a great deal of economic geography in it. There were three main elements of analysis: the land market, business cycles, and class struggle. The first gave the immediate impetus to developers to push and pull the urban fringe outward; the second provided the larger impulse for property booms and development excesses; and the third explained the buy-off of the working class through consumerism and housing in the suburban context. What was missing, however, was any sense of the role of industry in the outward flux of the American city. I spun off a couple of articles on the logic of American suburbanization (e.g. 1981), but, unfortunately, never turned it all into a book – thereby being forever scooped by Kenneth Jackson's *The Crabgrass Frontier* (Jackson 1987); take heed, newly minted PhDs! As a result, I was never categorized as an Urban Geographer. Such are the vagaries of the disciplinary life.

I jumped into the field of economic geography in the early 1980s, thanks to visiting stints at Berkeley by Doreen Massey and Bennett Harrison and a

spectacular group of students in City Planning and Geography at Berkeley, which included AnnaLee Saxenian, Meric Gertler, Erica Schoenberger, Kristin Nelson and Amy Glasmeier. The mass plant closures of that era in Britain and the United States were the catalyst to rethinking industrial location theory ('New Industrial Geography') – just as the urban crisis of the 1960s had influenced Harvey and others to rethink cities.

I began writing with Michael Storper, one of many amazing graduate students I have collaborated with, and we did a series of articles that culminated in *The Capitalist Imperative* (1989). That book was meant to be an answer to the neo-classical, equilibrium location theory that had ruled the roost since Walter Isard. It took on board seminal contributions by Lloyd and Dicken (1977), Doreen Massey (1984), Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison (1982), and Allen Scott (1988). But it rested on a wider foundation drawn from reading in economic theory, industrial history, and labor studies.

The major arguments of *The Capitalist Imperative* were of two kinds. On the one hand, it emphasized the dynamics of economic growth rather than the static allocation models of location coming out of the (Alfred) Weber tradition. Growth is driven by capital investment, strong competition, and pervasive disequilibrium. The model of growth was a Marx-Schumpeter-Keynes hybrid. At the same time, the model of 'geographical industrialization' rested on a firm basis in production, including technology, labor process and the division of labor.

It bothered me that Neil Smith (1984) and David Harvey's (1982, 1990) ideas on economy and geography gained such currency while our theme of 'geographical industrialization' was not widely taken up. Smith and Harvey kept to the realm of high abstraction of capital theory without ever descending into the nuts and bolts of production, meaning that they played loose and fast with industrial history and spatial patterns. The geography of production is so much more dynamic, varied and interesting than concepts like 'uneven development', 'spatial fix', and 'flexible accumulation' imply. My views on this have not changed much, as can be seen from my chapter on production in Sheppard and Barnes (2000).

In the 1990s, Michael Storper went on to collaborate with Allen Scott at UCLA, pursuing a dense regional analysis. I was less enamored of the liberalism of the New Institutionalism and its epigones such as Charles Sabel, Michael Porter, and Robert Putnam. Class conflict, capital accumulation, and state power were left out of the equation. Instead, I wrote articles on the failings of flexible specialization theory, on value theory, and on the economic role of technical change (1985, 1988, 1989, 1995a). I further developed my ideas about the division of labor in *The New Social Economy* (1992), written with geography's leading philosopher (also part economic geographer) Andrew Sayer. This was an occasion to rethink such large economic topics as the definition of services versus production, comparative industrial systems, business organization, and class formation (things I had begun writing about in the 1980s). The result was, again, somewhat disappointing in that our reflections intrigued readers but did not become a part of the collective imagination of economic geographers (let alone sociologists and the rest).

Instead, the decade of the 1990s saw me return to urban geography, using the San Francisco Bay Area as point of entry. I had been teaching Urban Field Geography since 1980, after taking over the course from Jay Vance. Despite tense relations with the prickly Vance, I learned a great deal about urban history from his writings. Allan Pred's historical work was another huge influence, and he became a good friend, as well. I've never lost my belief that without historical depth, economic and urban geography are inevitably shallow enterprises. This has often sent me into the arms of the historical geographers (who are another world apart), and made me skeptical of many of the glib claims coming from economic geographers about Post-This and the New-That.

This phase of work started with a long essay on the Bay Area (1990). It was inspired in part by Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* (1992) and Ed Soja's sweeping studies of Los Angeles (1989). I also had long admired Harvey's essays on nineteenth century Paris done in the 1970s (now out in a stunning book, *Paris: Capital of Modernity*, 2003). Mike asked me to turn the Bay Area essay into a short book for Verso Press, but, instead, the project exploded into a full-fledged attempt to capture the urbanization process in all its dimensions over a century. The idea was to combine the following:

- How industry molds cities over time (1996a, 2004a)
- How class and race divisions create a residential city of realms (1995b, 1996)
- How politics and social struggles over space have shaped the city (1998, 2007)
- How property development creates the built environment (1981, 1998, 2006)

These angles on urbanization combined several influences. The first was the reintegration of industrial location and city form. These had been sundered between economic and urban geography until Allen Scott put them back together in the 1980s. The second was how property development shaped the city, which Harvey (1973) had brought back into urban geography (and Harvey Molotch [1976] into urban sociology). The third was how class and class struggle shaped cities, which had been revived by Harvey, Chester Hartman (1984) writing on San Francisco's urban renewal, and Davis' political portrait of Los Angeles.

Another element – the look of the urban landscape – has been a significant part of my writing and teaching on the Bay Area (1995b). I firmly believe that in the distinctive elements of house types, gardens, and street layouts, among other parts of the built environment, one can find keys to the secrets of a city and a place. I never much liked the conservative views of J. B. Jackson, Pierce Lewis and other purveyors of the Landscape School in a previous generation; but my contemporaries in Cultural Landscape studies, such as Paul Groth (1994), Deryck Holdsworth and Gray Brechin (1999), have taken the field in very different directions. These are not names that regularly come up in economic geography, yet they have much to say about labor markets, merchant networks, office functions,

resource flows, and more. The tensions between the old and new, left and right, in landscape studies are apparent in Groth and Bressi's collection, in which I have an essay (1997b).

Urban and historical geographers know that economic geography is never enough. It is only the skin and bones of cities and regions and countries, never the flesh. And the latter, the social order, is what gives places their face and their personality, and gives capitalism its necessary human and geographic form. Anyone coming out of urban studies doesn't need to rediscover local institutions, local governance, local cultures, and so forth in the way economic geographers have had to do; urban studies are inherently more attuned to politics, power, race, class and community, and less likely to fall into the traps of economism.

That necessarily means that my interest in the Bay Area has also been an extended inquiry into the social and political peculiarities of the place. On the economic side, this led to an inquiry into the character of California social relations and economic development going back to the Gold Rush (2001). My long look at California's social order took seriously Annalee Saxenian's challenge to economism in her study of Silicon Valley (1994), but pushed it much farther back in time than she was able to do – and made for a more ambiguous tale of the intertwining of regional social relations and regional economic development.

That project also grew out of a long dialogue with the 'roads to capitalism' approach to regional growth pioneered by Barrington Moore and Charles Post. It revisited some of the themes I developed with Brian Page (1991, 1994). We ruffled some feathers by challenging William Cronon's magisterial view of the region in *Nature's Metropolis* (1992), which, we argued, is just a variant of the Adam Smith trade theory of development, previously exposited by Vance (1970), that skips too lightly over the agrarian and industrial development of the Midwest (Cronon was not pleased, but we have since become very friendly, and he is publishing my latest book).

On the more political side, I tried to track California's contemporary condition (1995c). Without question, my view was darkened by the political malaise of the state and its anti-immigrant movement in the mid-1990s. Things turned around after that, but after another major economic crisis we've returned to reaction and degradation under Arnold Schwarzenegger. I became involved in resistance to Proposition 187 and wrote on immigration to California, including a pamphlet co-authored by Jeff Lustig (it was disowned by Mario Savio, leader of our little political coalition, because of objections by a couple of African-American members, before he and his son wrote a remarkably similar essay on their own). That experience, along with the creation of the American Cultures requirement at UC Berkeley, led me to plunge further into race theory and race history for my Geography of California course, and to incorporate racial order more thoroughly into my conception of class and political economy (1996b). A glimpse of these moves can be found in an essay in Roger Lee and Jane Wills' *Geographies of Economy* (1997a). They are the kind of necessary enrichment of social economic thinking we need more of in economic geography.

After what seems like forever – thanks to long interludes as a department chair and father – the Bay Area work will finally come together into two books on the urbanization of San Francisco and Silicon Valley (almost 20 years will have passed, making me feel rather old). In some respects, these are only particular case studies of American city formation. In other respects, the Bay Area is distinctive, as in what I've called its 'ecotopian middle landscape' of upper middle class residence or in its long history of maintaining the urban core as a cosmopolitan, politicized space. In still other respects, I've found the area a maddening combination of the unique and the mundane, like the juxtaposition of Silicon Valley's technical innovation and its banality of urban form.

A piece of the Bay Area project on the rural landscapes of the metropolis broke off to become a book of its own, a history of California agribusiness, *The Conquest of Bread* (2004b). This is a work of economic geography as much as anything else. As one might expect, key themes are the logic of agrarian capitalism, the expanding division of labor, production networks, class oppression, and the peculiarity of California's social order. These bump into secondary theses on remaking the natural landscape, the evolution of consumption, and so forth. Here, again, I was deeply influenced by two former students, Julie Guthman (2004) and George Henderson (1998), who have written brilliantly about California agribusiness, and Michael Watts, with whom I have shared many students in agrarian development. I also admire Don Mitchell's (1996) excoriation of rural landscape studies, though I depart from his narrowly farm-worker centered view of California agriculture.

The long tap root of my interest in agriculture goes back to the 1970s and my political education growing out of the movements supporting the farm workers and occupational health regulation. I didn't have to read agrarian theory to understand the importance of nature in agriculture, because I'd already been inculcated with the idea of real impacts of pesticides and water, among other things. And I carried that idea over to industrial geography in my treatments of technology, industrial variation and the labor process leading up to *The Capitalist Imperative*.

Another spin-off from the Bay Area project is a new book, *The Country in the City* (2007), on the way the countryside has become part of the urban fabric, especially as open space and parks. I argue for the distinctiveness of Bay Area environmentalism as a mass political movement and for the radical element of opposition to capital (especially property development). This historical geography takes me back to my political origins and highlights my own contradictory position as an upper class environmentalist and class-renegade friend of workers, immigrants and the poor. I am very likely too soft on white environmentalists, but the point is to show how important this kind of sustained critique of capitalism and American urbanization is – because it is so rare, so hard to maintain, and so much a part of a larger, reinforcing culture of left-leaning politics nurtured in what is known hereabouts as 'the Left Coast of America'. This project thus echoes the ideas about regional social order I have put forward with regard to economic development and the exploitation of nature, or ecotopian urban landscapes, but with a quite different twist.

Despite all the work on California, I do not believe in the priority of local over the global. I have to keep abreast of developments in global political economy for my course, the Economic Geography of the Industrial World. In the late 1990s, I wrote on the state of American labor in the face of global competition and global failure of capital accumulation (1999). Echoing Bob Brenner (2002) on the excesses of the 1990s, I argue that the fate of labor is not just about location and worker competition, but also the performance of national and world capital. On the other hand, I have debated Brenner about his relatively feeble approach to technology and geography. I have tried to link the global and the local in my latest paper on the influence of the US bubble economy of the late 1990s on the Bay Area and its urban landscape (2006).

So, in the end, my approach to geography is hard to put in a box. I regularly teach the global economy, but love to write about the local. I emphasize the grinding of the capitalist gears, but think that economic geography cannot make sense of things without social relations and politics. I see class all around but never doubt the significance of race, gender and nation. I watch with disgust the American empire trampling the globe in a thoroughly predictable way, while believing in the heroic achievements of a few dedicated Greens, counterculturalists or anarchists in the belly of the monster. I have tried to maintain my status as an iconoclast even as I've matured from Young Turk to Old Fart in the discipline. I have kept to my course, while being deeply influenced by brilliant people around me.

I have even come to terms with being a Geographer, with a capital 'G'. For a long time, I felt I'd backed into the discipline and could care less about the disciplinary obsessions of my colleagues. But time has worn down my contrariness. I've accommodated to being a Geographer. I see the discipline as in many ways better than the alternatives, like economics and sociology, which wouldn't know an ecosystem if it hit them in the eye. On the other hand, I do not believe that Geography is uniquely situated to know the world. What Geography does is to put me in contact with a lot of open minds and imaginative people who look at things in original ways. With time, I have come to see my career as a very long education of an economic geographer – though an education of a quite different sort than that of Carl Sauer (1963), whose essay title I've commandeered and whose long shadow of antipathy to things economic, political or modern hung over Berkeley geography for decades. So while arrived at by serendipity and circuitousness, the label Geographer will do as well as anything else. Economic Geographer sounds good, too – and is particularly useful when dealing with calls from the press, since no one in the United States seems to know what geography is. But just plain Geographer fits well enough to wear.

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