

Reading Economic Geography

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Reading Economic Geography is a complementary Reader to the Blackwell *Companion to Economic Geography*, which was published in 2000. It follows the structure of the Companion and in its 25 chapters contains some of the most influential work in economic geography 'proper'.¹

This book does a lot more than to simply offer a selection of relevant articles. It has a coherent structure, objectives that are well communicated, and an emphasis on a synthetic presentation and critical reading of the selected articles, which is reflected in the excellent contributions of the editors in the introduction of each part of the book. Its target audience is that of students studying towards an economic geography degree, although much of the material included –and especially the contributions of the editors– should be useful for a much wider audience in and outside economic geography. Owing to the excellent editorial work, the book can be read in many levels, three of which I wish to highlight. First, as a source of historical-disciplinary information, something like an academic bedtime reading for those interested in the recent history of economic geography. Second, as a textbook that introduces core issues in economic geography, probably mainly suiting an undergraduate audience. And, third, for graduate research, as a methodological handbook, a library of the different theoretical approaches that together comprise and describe the modern discipline of economic geography.

The book is organised in five Parts, each comprising of five chapters, mirroring the structure of the Companion to Economic Geography. The first part, 'Worlds of Economic Geography', includes chapters that discuss and/or illustrate the different paradigms that have marked the discipline since the 1970s. The editors provide an excellent introduction to this part by contextualising and synthesising the works included there. The first chapter represents David Harvey's marxist economic

¹ The theme of the book is 'proper' economic geography as distinct from 'geographical economics' and the 'new economic geography' of the modern trade theory. Topics and methods of the latter are not considered and readers interested in these approaches would do well to direct their attention elsewhere.

geography and discusses its past role and present significance. Chapter two, by Andrew Sayer, offers a critical realist perspective to economic geography research, based on the author's much-celebrated work on 'industry and space'. The chapter by Ash Amin introduces an institutionalist perspective on regional economic development, while Thrift and Olds present the cultural approach to the economics of economic geography in chapter four. The first part concludes with a chapter by Gibson-Graham and their cultural-economic exploration of the 'geography of the body'. Thus, each chapter represents a distinct paradigm within the discipline but the editors' selection is successful in highlighting the connectivity and continuity of the distinct approaches.

'Realms of Production' is the title of the second part, which covers the analysis of the changing geography and organisation of production. Richard Walker's chapter discusses the changing importance of the service sector in capitalist production from a marxist perspective. Chapter eight presents Allen Scott's work on flexible accumulation, representing the 'regulationist' approach to the analysis of (the geography of) capitalism. Doreen Massey's chapter on the spatial divisions of labour sits somewhere in the middle both - metaphorically and literally (chapter seven). The issue of globalisation and trans-national corporations, the macro-approach to economic geography, is covered in Peter Dicken's contribution (chapter nine), while the final chapter (by M. Wright) presents a more micro/anthropological approach to the examination of capitalist organisation of production, in conjunction with the issues of gender, identity and culture.

Part three looks at 'Resource Worlds', with five contributions examining how natural and other resources are produced, reproduced and assigned different meanings in different places and social contexts. This is a topic originating from the more traditional work on economic geography, but also of increasing significance today, as the work of Whatmore and Thorne demonstrates. The first three essays by Noel Castree, Erik Swyngedouw and Michael Watts employ a marxist/political-economy perspective in their historical analyses of resource-use, focusing on the fur seal industry, water-use, and the 1970s oil boom in developing countries, respectively. Judith Carney's contribution (chapter 14) is a political-ecology analysis of the relation between modernisation, resource-use and social-gender relations. The last chapter in this section, by Whatmore and Thorne, considers the role of networks and knowledge in a case study of Fair-Trade exports of coffee from Peru to Britain.

Following, part four examines the social construction and organisation of the economic ('Social Worlds'), one of the main contribution of economic geography over the recent years, at least in relation to mainstream economic orthodoxy. In chapter sixteen Phillip O'Neil examines the role of the state in economic geography, while in the next chapter Michael Storper considers the role of globalisation and territorial hierarchies in shaping the (re-)organisation of economic relations and policy. The re-configuration of economic (and class) relations is also considered in chapter eighteen (by Hudson and Sadler), albeit from a more structuralist perspective and with emphasis on de-industrialisation. The last two chapters of this part, by Ruth Fincher and Linda McDowell, focus on the organisation of the labour market, considering the re-configuration of the social and economic through a gender approach to economic relations and the local state.

The last part of the book, titled 'Spaces of Circulation', seeks to investigate the role and meaning of space, physical and economic distance, and connectivity. Drawing on issues like information technologies, economic linkages, social networks and physical transport infrastructure, the contributions in this part provide alternative examinations, within the broader context of economic geography, of the connectivity and interaction of places rather than of the constitution/organisation of each place in isolation. Stephen Graham examines the role of information technology in re-shaping space and distance and their impact on local social landscapes. Chapter twenty-two (by Meric Gertler) focuses on the economic and cultural distances that connect or separate places (e.g., industrial districts), thus affecting their economic success. Hsing's essay employs a more political/institutional approach to examine patterns of FDI in Southern Chinese cities, although again focus is on the interaction of local cultures. Similar questions, albeit from a more structuralist-feminist approach, are asked in Geraldine Pratt's chapter on migration flows of Philippine women to Vancouver, Canada. Erica Schoenberger's chapter concludes this part –and the book– with a more theoretical examination of connectivity and the construction of economic concepts, through two case studies examining the relation between competitiveness and wages.

Overall, the book is well structured and the articles fit well into the themes and objectives set by the editors. Nevertheless, there are a couple of criticisms that I think need to be raised. First, I find the issues and approaches covered in the book too partial. *Reading Economic Geography* refers to a very narrow definition of economic

geography as a discipline, even if one accepts the distinction between ‘economic geography’ and ‘geographical economics’. Although this significantly adds to the coherence of the book, it probably makes it less useful as a tool for the very audience it mainly targets (geography students). At best, it contributes to the separation of the various strands of research and thinking within and around the discipline. At worst, it presents to the newcomers of economic geography a false picture of what the discipline is like and about. Second, I find many of the selected articles rather dated (a fifth of them comes from the 1980s and almost half of them are now at least 10 years old). Although still relevant, their value in illuminating current debates and developments in the discipline is limited and probably most of the articles have already a place in the bookshelves (or the hard-disks) of most economic geographers.² The non-inclusion of more contemporary contributions in some parts of the book might reflect partly the endurance / timelessness of the selected articles or the editors’ objective of providing a more historical reading of economic geograohy. However, to an extent it also reflects the relative absence of progressive contributions in the rather narrow definition of economic geography on which the editors focus. In this respect, the editors have done well to enrich their selection of articles with their insightful and synthetic introductory notes to each of the five parts. This is probably the most valuable aspect of *Reading Economic Geography* and it is for this reason that I would recommend it both as an undergraduate and a postgraduate (or even bedtime) reading, for people in and outside this stream of economic geography.

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² Further, some contributions come from larger pieces of work (three from the author’s own books; six from other edited volumes) and thus -despite the editors’ efforts- some lack the depth and completeness of the arguments that one would expect to see. Reading Harvey’s contribution (chapter one), for example, I ended up looking for the concluding chapter where Harvey “turn[s] towards the end of this book towards the figure of utopia” (p.28; Harvey is referring to the concluding chapter of his *Spaces of Hope*, Edinburgh University Press, 2000, where his contribution comes from).