

TOWARDS A GLOBAL GEO-POLITICAL ECONOMY

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Towards a Global Geo-Political Economy

Introduction

This chapter introduces two lively areas of contemporary Human Geography – Economic and Political Geography – and provides an outline of recent research which seeks to understand processes of globalization from a geographical perspective.

The chapter begins by introducing Economic Geography and Political Geography, identifying key areas of research, and detailing the commonalities in the recent development of these important sub-disciplines. In the second part of the paper I briefly review recent research around the theme of globalization and cross-border activities and introduce the approach of geo-political economy, an approach which seeks to understand the changing organization of power (politics) and wealth (economics) by focusing on their geographies.

Economic Geography

The Development of Contemporary Economic Geography

Economic geography has, over the decades, been one of the most dynamic sub-disciplines within Human Geography. In the late 19th Century, British Economic Geography, for better or worse, helped to catalogue the world-wide distribution of resources and in particular the resources available for commercial exploitation throughout the British Empire. In the first half of the 20th Century, Economic Geographers concentrated their efforts at the regional level, contributing to rich but under-theorized descriptions of particular regions – the cotton industry in Lancashire, the steel industry around Sheffield, shipbuilding in Clydeside. From the 1960s, with the advent of computers and the desire to become more scientific, Economic Geographers such as Michael Chisholm, Peter Haggett, and David Harvey (in his earlier positivist non-Marxist guise) were at the forefront of the so-called quantitative revolution (Billinge, Gregory and Martin, 1984). During this period Economic Geographers sought to produce mathematical models to better explain and predict the spatial organization of economic activity. Variables such as market size, volume of inputs into the manufacturing process and transport costs were combined, producing formal well-defined models,

developing a body of work called industrial location theory (Haggett, 1965) which had a great influence beyond the sub-discipline.

Despite the beauty of many of these models, by the 1970s criticisms of the quantitative revolution began to appear. David Harvey's conversion to Marxism marked an important development within Economic Geography as it was increasingly felt that mathematical models side-stepped the all important questions, making unrealistic assumptions about the way the world is – it's not really a flat isotropic plain populated by unflinchingly rational economic actors with perfect information! – and about the relationship between social science and the real world (Harvey, 1973). Economic Geographers such as Doreen Massey began to develop a Marxist Economic Geography which considered the economy as a subset of a capitalist society characterized by great inequalities of power and wealth (Massey, 1984; Massey and Meegan, 1982).

Such an approach to Economic Geography, despite some trenchant criticisms of Marxism, was dominant through the 1980s and still persists, although, in part as a result of the arrival of postmodernism within the social sciences, the agenda has become considerably more eclectic (Doherty, Graham and Malek, 1992; Lee and Wills, 1997; Martin, 1994a). In a recent exciting development, the other social sciences – Sociology, Political Science, Law and even Economics – have begun to rediscover the importance of geography to the way the world works. Geography and Geographers play increasingly important roles within the social sciences with Economic Geographers – David Harvey, Doreen Massey, Ed Soja and Michael Storper for instance – taking the lead. (Harvey, 1989 and 1996; Massey, 1994; Soja, 1989 and 1996; Storper and Salais, 1997).

Key Themes in Contemporary Economic Geography

We can outline the focus of contemporary Economic Geography in terms of 3 aspects of the social and spatial organization of wealth: production, consumption and circulation.

Historically, Economic Geographers have tended to focus on production, making Economic

Geography all-but synonymous with Industrial Geography. Although the focus has expanded considerably, much of the work within Economic Geography is still concerned with issues of production. Over the last ten years “Restructuring” has been perhaps the key theme within Economic Geography as Economic Geographers have sought to understand the ways in which, and the reasons why, advanced industrial economies have changed over the last twenty or thirty years (Martin, 1994a).

An important model of restructuring, developed in part by Economic Geographers, sees processes of restructuring as involving a shift from a Fordist regime to a post-Fordist regime in which manufacturing is more flexibly organized, and consumers demand greater variety than the “any colour you like, as long as it’s black” option of Fordism (Amin, 1994; Harvey, 1989). One implication of this model which Economic Geographers have considered is whether Fordism and post-Fordism have characteristic geographies and spatial divisions of labour (Massey, 1995), with Post-Fordism perhaps leading to a new international division of labour in which manufacturing activity is increasingly located in the Third World where labour costs are low and potential profits are high, whilst research and development takes place in places like Silicon Fen (Cambridge) and Silicon Valley (California) which can attract top-quality scientists and engineers (Dicken, 1998).

Related to this research theme, Economic Geographers have sought to understand the changing geographies of labour and work within the UK economy (Peck, 1996). Researchers have examined the implications of the decline of manufacturing industry and the rise of service industries, small firms and hi-tech industries (with the Cambridge Science Park providing an important case study), the feminization of the workforce and the changing roles and geographies of Trade Union activity (Martin, Sunley and Wills, 1996).

Consumption provides a second main theme within Economic Geography, with researchers seeking to understand the organization of shopping and its particular geographies (Wrigley and Lowe, 1996). The themed shopping experience offered by shopping malls such as the

MetroCentre (Newcastle), Lakeside (Essex), Merryhill (Birmingham) has been heavily researched, but geographers have also looked at more marginal sites of consumption such as car-boot sales and markets (Gregson and Crewe, 1994). Rather than looking simply at the practice of shopping, Geographers have investigated the geographies of provision – the chains which link distant producers and consumers – and the geographies of usage in which different people in different places use the things they buy in different ways, using exotic foods, art, furnishings etc. to construct their identities in particular ways.

A third and as yet less significant theme (in terms of volume of research) of contemporary Economic Geography concerns circulation, the ways in which commodities, money, people, capital, ideas, information and images, flow around the world, constructing particular economic geographies. Important research has been conducted on the geographies of money and the ways in which flows of money link distant places and lubricate the wheels of the capitalist economy (Corbridge, Martin and Thrift, 1994; Leyshon and Thrift, 1997; Martin, 1998).

Political Geography

The Development of Contemporary Political Geography

Political Geography too has been central to research within Human Geography for more than a century. As Agnew puts it: ‘Political geography concerns the processes involved in creating, and the consequences for human populations of, the uneven distribution of power over the earth’s surface’ (Agnew, 1997, p.1). Despite changes in its approach and focus over the decades, such a definition usefully emphasizes the central question for Political Geographers: How does the spatial organization of power come about and how does it affect the way the social world works?

In the late 19th and early 20th Centuries Political Geography concerned itself with the production of advice for statesmen, about how best to organize their powers. Such a focus is clearly illustrated by the role played by Political Geographers in the Versailles Peace

Conference which re-drew the boundaries of Europe following the First World War. Of particular note is Mackinder's Heartland thesis which suggested that the state which controlled Central Europe would maintain its dominance.

In the mid-20th Century Political Geography fell into disrepute through its association with German Geopolitik and the imperial ambitions of the Nazi Regime. Employing environmentally determinist metaphors of the state as an organism which requires space (lebensraum) to expand if it is to survive, and building on the work of Haushofer, Geopolitik was arguably instrumental to the simultaneously spatial and political strategies of the Nazis. Such an association left Political Geography in the doldrums through the 1940s and 1950s, a situation which was not helped by the relative failure of Political Geographers to usefully develop mathematical models of geopolitical processes during the quantitative revolution of the 1960s.

Political Geography began to develop in a more useful direction through the 1970s as Political Geographers concentrated their efforts around the analysis of intra-state territorial conflicts and externalities – where should hospitals and toxic-waste disposal facilities be located?; and how might racial conflicts in urban areas be reduced? An important and related sub-theme at this time was Electoral Geography which sought to describe, explain, and perhaps even predict, election results from a spatial perspective: what difference did the location of constituency boundaries make?; how important was location as a factor in determining individuals' voting behaviour? (Johnston, 1979).

From the 1980s, stimulated by the development of a Marxist Economic Geography, and crystallized by the establishment of the journal *Political Geography (Quarterly)*, the sub-discipline moved out of the doldrums and into the mainstream of disciplinary developments. Political Geographers began to look beyond the borders of individual states to consider the world system as a whole and the relationships between countries in the rich Northern core and the poor Southern periphery (Taylor, 1993). In recent years, Political Geography, with its

continuing focus on the spatial organization of power has positioned itself centrally within contemporary Human Geography (Agnew, 1997; Allen, 1997).

Key Themes in Contemporary Political Geography

Although much of contemporary Human Geography concerns itself with issues of power and its spatial organization, there remains a certain distinctiveness to Political Geography research, which concerns itself with issues of statehood, citizenship, nationalism and new social movements. As the primary geo-political unit, the state provides the reference point for many Political Geographers, even for those whose focus is on politics beyond state borders or at sub-state scales.

A first research theme examines the nature of the state and how states were historically made and are currently being transformed under the pressure of new social forces, loosely termed globalization. Political Geographers seek to understand the meanings of citizenship and democracy and their geographical aspects (Smith, 1990). What rights and obligations does citizenship or membership in the club of a state confer upon individuals, and how can these rights and obligations best be implemented? How has the nature of democratic politics developed over the years and what are its geographies?

A second related theme considers place and the processes through which places are socially and politically constructed as relatively separate and different from other places (Agnew, 1987). Given the centrality of geographical difference to the disciplinary project of Geography, such research is of great importance. Interestingly, in this area of research, parallels are often drawn between the construction of individual identity or self-hood, and the construction of places and their characteristics (Keith and Pile, 1993; Massey, 1993; Massey and Jess, 1995). Places are made by the intersection of many different social processes – class, gender, race – just as an individual's identity may include being a man, being a Northerner, being an academic, being a football supporter and being a violinist.

A third theme investigates the ways in which people feel a sense of belonging to particular places and social groups, especially their nations. Research on nationalism sees such a facet of identity as both a feeling of belonging and an ideology which states can use to develop a national project – “Cool Britannia” for instance – but which nations can also use to argue and fight for political autonomy from states which exercise power over more than one nation.

A fourth research theme investigates the role of so-called new social movements, which organize around issues such as feminism, environmentalism, gay and lesbian issues, the rights of indigenous tribal groups, and anti-nuclearism. Contrasts are drawn between the cross-border geographies of such social movements and the intra-state organization of traditionally institutionalized politics (Wapner, 1996).

Common to all research within Political Geography is a concern with the intersection of issues of space and power. How is power organized spatially, and how does the way in which power is spatially organized make a difference to the exercise of power? This, despite the lingering state-centrism of Political Geography, is what geo-politics is all about.

Common Trends: Society, Space and Scales

Despite their differences, it is possible to identify some similarities and convergence between Economic and Political Geography, both historically and in terms of contemporary research.

Breaking Down the (Sub-)Disciplinary Walls

Ironically enough, a first similarity and convergence is that it is increasingly difficult to draw clear boundaries around the sub-disciplines, to say what is Political or Economic Geography and what isn't. Under the influence of Marxist approaches to social science which see (sub)-disciplinary boundaries as artificial and unhelpful divides, and postmodern discourses which muddy the meanings of all concepts, walls between sub-disciplines and disciplines are gradually being dismantled.

At the disciplinary level there have been exciting cross-disciplinary developments between Human Geography and its sister social sciences of Economics, Politics, Sociology, Cultural Studies, International Relations and Law. At the sub-disciplinary level it is increasingly difficult, and perhaps pretty pointless, to pigeon-hole individual researchers as Historical, Cultural, Economic, Political, Development or Environmental Geographers.

Relatedly, throughout Human Geography, including the sub-disciplines of Economic and Political Geography, there have been interesting and important moves to develop a more gender-aware approach. Rather than just adding “women” as another category, researchers have sought to systematically understand the ways in which gender – the roles assigned to, and the parts played by, men and women – makes a difference to the way the world works (Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1997).

Society and Space

A second commonality between research in Economic and Political Geography – as well as in other branches of contemporary Human Geography – concerns the ways in which the relationship between society and space is conceptualized (Gregory and Urry, 1985; Soja, 1989). As Human Geography focuses on the spatial organization of social life, the way in which society and space are related to each other is absolutely central to the development of Human Geography.

At one time – the first part of the 20th Century – the dominant view was that spatial or environmental factors – climate, soils, vegetation – determined what societies were like.

Space/Environment —> Society

Such an environmental determinism was discredited over the years to the point when, in the quantitative revolution, spatial patterns were seen as just being spread over the social world with little explanation of the processes involved.

Society on Space

Through the 1970s, the pendulum continued to swing, affording greater explanatory weight to social causes, such that spatial outcomes were seen as having social causes, that is capitalist social processes produced capitalist geographies.

Capitalist Society —> Capitalist Space

Over the last fifteen or twenty years, the society-space relationship has been reconceptualized as a two-way street such that social processes do shape spatial patterns, but then these spatial patterns in turn make a difference to the ways in which social processes work. Society is space; space is society; Geography matters!

Society <—> Space

Much research in contemporary Human Geography seeks to illustrate and explain that Geography matters, and, recently, Geographers have begun to make considerable and crucial efforts to not just assert that Geography matters, but to explain the ways in which Geography matters – through features and concepts such as space, place, boundaries, territories, flows, landscapes, and scales. This is another commonality between contemporary Economic and Political Geography.

Linking Scales

A third area of commonality between Economic and Political Geography, not to mention Environmental and Physical Geography, concerns the ways in which different scales – the local, regional, national, and global – relate to each other, and, in fact, what it even means to talk of scales and scale.

Up until at least the 1970s, both Economic and Political Geography tended to focus on processes and patterns at one scale, in many cases the national scale. Nation-states were seen as relatively self-contained social units and as suitable units – with readily available national statistical data – for analysis. However, in the 1970s – with the oil price hikes, the collapse of the Bretton Woods international monetary system, and the rise of multinational manufacturing – it was increasingly realized that the fate of national economies was very much influenced by processes operating in other nation-states and across the borders. Similarly, research began to focus on the idea that the way in which a state operates as a political unit is shaped by the ways in which other states operate and how they relate to each other.

Rather than a simplistic conceptualization of global processes causing local outcomes, or conversely local processes producing global outcomes, Economic and Political Geographers have begun to appreciate that there is a two-way relationship between the global and the local – what some Geographers have called glocalization. Contemporary research examines social processes which operate at a variety of scales, with the key issue now being how different scales are linked up, and more fundamentally, how scales are not given but are socially produced and therefore changeable (Harvey, 1996; Smith, 1992; Swyngedouw, 1997).

Globalizations

The Geo-political Economy of Globalizations

These three trends which are common to Economic and Political Geography are especially apparent in research concerned with processes of globalization. Economic and Political Geography both throw light on processes of globalization, particularly when their efforts are combined; globalization is at once a social and a spatial process; and, globalization involves the social production and transformation of scale.

Globalization refers to processes which increase the scale of social life, and therefore increasingly involve processes which operate across borders at multiple scales. In recent years

many commentators – academics, journalists, politicians, activists – have begun to talk about a variety of globalizations (Anderson, Brook and Cochrane, 1995; Daniels and Lever, 1996; Hirst and Thompson, 1996; Kofman and Youngs, 1996). Prominent examples include: the spread of financial activity across state borders, as seen in the exit of the pound sterling from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism in 1992 and the ongoing East Asian Financial Crisis; the near-world-wide take up of a Reaganite/Thatcherite political ideology in the 1980s; the diffusion of American culture worldwide through products such as Coca-Cola, McDonalds, MTV and CNN; the increasingly important role of transnational corporations in the world economy; the development of the internet, a social space which is relatively placeless; and the globalization of environmental issues as illustrated through global problems such as the hole in the ozone layer, biodiversity loss and global warming.

So, there are multiple globalizations, some of which seem economic, some political, some cultural, and some environmental. However, these multiple globalizations do have a common denominator, a common denominator which is intrinsically geographical. What all these processes of globalization have in common is that they involve an upward shift in the scale of social life, changes in the meaning and porosity of national boundaries and increases in the volume, velocity and importance of cross-border flows, no matter whether these are flows of money, goods, ideas, images or pollutants. In this way, processes of globalization lend themselves to geographical analyses. In fact, I would go so far as to say that we cannot understand processes of globalization unless we understand their geographies.

That said, and in line with the earlier point about society and space shaping each other, it is not enough to simply try to understand the geographies of globalization without considering the power relations and exchange relations which shape and drive processes of globalization. Globalization is a shift in scale; scales are institutions which are socially produced through political and economic processes; so, Political Economy is likely to prove useful as an approach to understanding globalization.

Close to Human Geography in the disciplinary landscape, the approach of International Political Economy tends to examine globalization in terms of the relationships between states and markets (Frieden and Lake, 1995; Strange, 1988; Stubbs and Underhill, 1994). States are seen as the key political players, with markets the key economic players or medium.

Globalization is then conceptualized as markets seeking to escape the restrictions imposed by states. Although this idea of states and markets as separable actors is open to criticism, it does provide an interesting first stab at an understanding of globalization. With the addition of a geographical imagination – making for a geo-political economy approach – International Political Economy provides a useful tool for understanding processes of globalization.

States and markets, like many other social institutions have distinctive geographies. On the one hand we have states: institutions which set the rules or govern the activities which take place, and the people who live, in a particular territory with fixed borders. On the other hand we have markets: institutions which facilitate the process of exchange between producers and consumers, exchange which pays little attention to borders and will happily cross them. There is therefore a mismatch of scales. States are relatively fixed at the national scale, whilst markets more easily transcend borders. It is this mismatch or spatial tension which I would argue drives processes of globalization. Or, at least, this is one useful way of looking at it.

Geo-politics is about boundaries, identities and territories; geo-economics is about flows and exchanges; geo-political economy is about flows and exchanges which take place over, and in turn reshape, a landscape of borders and places. Through investigating this reshaping of the regulatory landscape we can begin to understand and explain – and perhaps even shape in fairer and more sustainable directions – processes of globalization. Geographers working from a geo-political economy perspective have sought to examine processes of globalization in terms of their geographies, employing, and further developing, ideas about scales and scaling, places and placing, territories and territoriality, borders and border-crossing, and landscapes and landscaping (Agnew and Corbridge, 1995; Cox, 1997; Hudson, 1998a).

Financial Globalization

Early research into the geo-political economy of globalization frequently concerned the paradigmatic case of international finance. Financial globalization involves financial flows which cross borders and reshape the regulatory landscape, altering the identity of places. One area of geographical research into processes of financial globalization looks at what are called global cities – places such as London, New York and Tokyo. Potentially, globalization and the telecommunications technologies which facilitate a spreading out of economic activity could remove the need for concentrated centres of activity in global cities. However, as much of the global cities literature argues, rather than destroying such cities, globalization changes their role and makes them even more important. A social system which is global in scope gets very complicated and messy, so global cities are increasingly important centres of control, places from which the flows of money, ideas, images, information and people are organized. In this way, globalization reworks what London, New York and Tokyo are as distinctive places in a globalizing economy (Hamnett, 1995; Knox and Taylor, 1995; Martin, 1994b; Sassen, 1991).

My own research into offshore financial centres took a similar tack, trying to understand the relationship between places such as the Bahamas, the Cayman Islands, Jersey and Guernsey and processes of financial globalization (Hudson, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). Offshore financial centres are places which offer investors a low-tax high-secrecy place in which to conduct their financial activity. They offer a regulatory environment which is more attractive than the onshore regulatory environment found in larger more tightly regulated countries such as the USA and the UK.

Offshore financial centres developed rapidly from the 1960s as the USA – for domestic political reasons – sought to restrict the flows of dollars across the borders of the USA, and to increase the level of regulation in US territory. The Bahamas and Cayman Islands – as separate sovereign territories with clear boundaries – were able to set up their own regulatory environments which were more attractive for financial purposes than the USA. So, large volumes of dollar-denominated banking fled offshore and out of the USA's regulatory space.

Sovereignty, the authority to set the rules of the game within a specific geographical territory, provided an excellent resource for these small marginal places to use in their development strategy.

However, somewhat paradoxically, the development of the Bahamas and Cayman Islands as offshore financial centres increased their dependence on processes and events which took place onshore. The USA was annoyed with the offshore financial centres because they facilitated tax evasion and the laundering of money from international crimes, particularly the international drugs trade. The USA retained some control or legislative authority over US banks such as Citibank who had branches in the Bahamas and Cayman, and so was able to exercise some power over the offshore financial centres by working through the transnational banks. In this way, although the offshore financial centres were built upon the principle of sovereignty, they in turn were forced to surrender aspects of their sovereignty.

This is the important point about the development of offshore financial centres. The international political economy had, for three centuries, had a particular geography. That is, it was organized in terms of sovereign states and their boundaries. The development of offshore financial centres was a key phase in the dismantling or transformation of sovereignty, a key moment in the reshaping of the regulatory landscape which is globalization.

Environmental Globalization and Non-State Actors

Just as financial assets increasingly flow across borders, environmental goods and bads - the impact of efforts to prevent the ozone hole increasing, or pollutants and greenhouse gases - similarly extend across the borders from the places where they originate. So, environmental globalization also challenges the spatial organization of the international political economy and its basis in sovereignty (Blowers and Glasbergen, 1996; Lipschutz, 1996; Porter and Welsh Brown, 1996).

When environmental problems are increasingly global in scope it is difficult for individual sovereign states to tackle them. Because of this collective action problem, new institutions – international regimes – with new geographies in which state borders are relatively unimportant have developed. For example there is an international regime which seeks to coordinate the actions of states in relation to the hole in the ozone layer, and there are developing regimes to tackle global warming and to preserve biodiversity. These international regimes shape and constrain the actions of individual states, transforming the meaning of sovereignty.

Of particular interest are cases when the goals of different international regimes – and perhaps their geographies – are in conflict. We might think here of the World Trade Organization (WTO) which governs international trade and the increasing numbers of cases in which the operation and rules of the game of the WTO come into conflict with the desire to protect environmental resources. Although the USA for instance might wish to protect dolphins caught off the shores of Mexico, the WTO framework means that the USA is unable to restrict imports of tuna which is caught in ways which kill too many dolphins. Such a problem is one of one country seeking to extend its values – its prioritization of dolphin-well-being over tuna-cheapness and fishermen's livelihoods – beyond its borders. The WTO is built on particular geo-political assumptions – states as the key actors – which conflict with environmental issues, dolphins for instance, which do not respect international borders.

To cope with the globalization of economic activity and environmental issues, states and corporations have sought to establish international institutions and new rules of the game to manage globalization and its resultant value conflicts. Away, but not separate from, the corporate and state power centres, other actors - NGOs, trades unions, religious organizations, consumer groups – broadly termed civil society – also argue that the rules of the game of the global political economy need to be changed, and seek to institutionalize different sets of values. A variety of new non-state actors – Greenpeace, Amnesty International, the Third World Network – have emerged to try and alter the rules of the game of international regimes and to try and mediate between different value systems, reshaping the

regulatory landscape in particular ways. Researchers in Geography, but more especially in International Political Economy and International Relations have sought to understand the emergence of a wide variety of non-state actors, many of which are involved in activities which are global in scope and pay little respect to national borders (Princen and Finger, 1994; Wapner, 1996). In fact for some commentators it is the cross-border geography of some non-state actors which gives them their leverage in the international political economy, as they are able to link the local with the global, pressing for issues of local concern to be placed on the global political agenda. In order to understand processes of globalization it is important to explore their geographies.

Conclusion

Economic and Political Geography continue to be vibrant sub-disciplines which can contribute to the understanding of contemporary social and spatial dynamics, particularly when their insights and approaches are combined. In an era when processes of globalization are increasingly dominant a geo-political economy approach which considers the geographical dimensions of economic and political processes is an important viewpoint for understanding the way the world works.

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