

A companion to Economic Geography

edited by Eric Sheppard and Trevor Barnes
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I like this book. There we are, laid out straight away to inform what comes below. The book looks good, it feels like a good text, it contains many of the 'big names' in economic geography, and more importantly it is a relevant statement within economic geography.

A Companion to Economic Geography fulfils its aim of demonstrating to an audience of undergraduate and postgraduate students that economic geography (as distinct to geographical economics) matters. The book stresses the centrality of (economic) geography to understanding society as we (as academics and social agents) confront, engage and exist within it. Indeed the broad argument is that "(t)he recent changes in the economy, which have affected so many people in so many different ways, are not only economic but also fundamentally geographical" (4). Positioned between other recent economic geography textbooks (Bryson *et al.*, 1999; Clark *et al.*, 2000) the *Companion* offers a thorough introduction into "the art of economic geography" (2): the editors and authors demonstrate that these are indeed interesting times to be studying within the sub-discipline.

The book explicitly characterises 'doing' geography as attempting to synthesise and represent multiple and changing phenomena as they are observed. Along these lines it perhaps unsurprising that most chapters demonstrate how the themes they outline have moved on from a neo-classical, hard scientific analysis to studies that identify the diverse and 'messy' nature of society. This is to be welcomed, and indeed has been recognised elsewhere (Wills and Lee, 1997).

The book provides a very useful anchor for the aspirant under- or postgraduate within the sea of a seemingly fast-changing discipline. The chapters (of which there are thirty – divided into five parts) universally serve to provide reviews of the subjects covered, providing stimulating reading in their own right, and are also very well edited to demonstrate the linked nature of much of what is discussed in the book. Moreover – and I think this is the main strength of the book – the authors serve to ask questions, probing readers into thinking about important issues, and by extension, how this influences their own work. On this point alone I would recommend the book; but more than this there are chapters of real quality within the collection.

After an agenda-setting introduction by Barnes and Sheppard, the first of the five parts – 'worlds of economic geography' – starts with a historical contextualisation of the discipline by Barnes (chapter two), arguing that economic geography is an invention of human (mostly male) thought and action that through its institutionalisation has affected the way economic geography is, and economic geographies are, studied. The rest of the section follows in a similar theoretical vein. Chapter three (Plummer), argues that economic geographic modelling is still relevant, but that it must move beyond traditional (neo-classical) location theory and reflect "the complex dynamics that operate on and through the economic landscape" (38). Swyngedouw (chapter four) calls for a "contribution to a truly humanizing geography" (49) though Marxism – the 'Big Questions' and the 'Big Issues' – still matter and academics would do well to remember this. Oberhauser's feminist intervention (chapter five) is a reminder of the socially constructed nature of the workforce and the integral nature of gendered power relations that exist within it. Chapter six (Martin) provides a thoughtful, broad and interesting overview of the 'institutional turn' within economic geography and Gibson-Graham (chapter seven) close the section with an exploration of the implications of the poststructural perspective of knowledge in "producing and transforming discourses, creating new subject positions and imaginative possibilities that can animate political projects

and desires [therefore possessing] the potential to offer a new model of geographic research” (105).

Part two, ‘realms of production’, contains six chapters, the first of which (chapter eight by Walker) outlines the way in which the ‘geography of production’ is mediated through many competing scales, spaces and places. In conclusion Walker asserts that ‘all that is solid melts into space’ and therefore that what is needed is a “geography full of the sound and fury of modern industrial production” (129). Peck’s chapter (nine) therefore is prescient in demonstrating the dialectical nature of the geography of labour, rejecting unilinear or binary analysis: “each time the geography of labor is remade, contradictions and counter-tendencies are set in motion” (147). Labour markets are therefore messy, contingent, multi-scaled, unique places of expression and repression, that help produce and reproduce capitalist accumulation. Amin’s intervention into the industrial district debate (chapter ten) is a useful and timely one: “In truth, the interest in industrial districts far exceeds their empirical significance” (150). In outlining the historical and recent debates, Amin asserts that industrial districts do serve a useful analytical purpose for regional development and sensitive regional policy – and that the debate has moved on sufficiently to allow this fruitful line of enquiry to be pursued. And here lies one of the few limitations to the book. In the light of the many arguments within geography over the position of policy-engagement by academics, this area could have provided an excellent opportunity to outline these arguments (see Amin, 1999; Lovering, 1999). This is not a criticism of Amin, and perhaps the editors are limited by the structure of the book, but it just seems strange that such a ‘hot topic’ has been overlooked.

Sheppard (chapter eleven) – echoing one of his editorial aims in analysing and challenging the discourse of competition - demonstrates how a “geographical perspective can call into question some time-honoured beliefs in economics itself” (170), and “calls into question the applicability of the invisible hand metaphor” (172). The chapter by Sunley (twelve) serves to build and develop the chapters mentioned above. A chapter that (again) questions the methodological assumptions of economics, it outlines the importance of geography and geographical techniques in analysing the interrelated nature of the economy and socio-economic processes. The section closes with Rigby’s examination of geography and technological change (chapter thirteen), grounding many of the debates and issues covered in the previous chapters.

Hanink’s chapter (fourteen) opens part three ‘resource worlds’ - a temporally eclectic section dealing with the relatively new and old areas of economic geographical interest – by embedding resources and their use within time and space, and demonstrating the diverse and unique place resources have within economic geography. This more contextual piece is followed by Page’s chapter (fifteen) which asserts that agriculture can provide another ‘vantage point’ from which to scrutinise and develop economic geographical theory (a position it held, he points out, during the 1950s). The recent developments in resource-influenced economic geography is demonstrated by the next two chapters. Watts (chapter sixteen) provides an overview of the way environmental problems have been addressed (and the way ‘authoritative advisors’ have been used by governments) in the last thirty years. By providing a history of political ecology, he aims to demonstrate “its conceptual toolkit and its theoretical [debates and] claims” (259). Castree (chapter seventeen) outlines how the interest by economic geographers in the ‘production of nature’ has grown since the 1980s, influenced by Marxist geographical and Marxian political-economic inquiry; and demonstrates how the economic system is “interwoven” with ecology and society more generally, identifying many important issues for consideration in the process. Hayter (chapter eighteen) provides the final chapter (on single industry resource towns) of part three. An interesting chapter, undoubtedly, but one that sits a little uneasily at the end of the section. In identifying the precarious place of these towns on the peripheries of the economy and ‘state spaces’, the chapter usefully demonstrates the way that resources, and their social use, impact upon people in real places, and how this has important implications for the way resource use is studied.

Part four, 'social worlds', deals, broadly, with social agents within economic geography. Gregson (chapter nineteen) maps the "interfusions of home-work and home-work-consumption" (312) asserting the need for analysis of family, work and consumption which is often "lost behind and obscured by gender concerns" (311). Sadler (chapter twenty), drawing upon recent interventions by Gibson-Graham (1996) and Castree (1999), calls for a re-utilisation of class as an explanatory concept in economic geography; whilst Herod (chapter twenty one) goes some way to fulfilling this by demonstrating how unions have come to be seen as important geographical actors in their own right – within a wider social context of which they are a constituent part. This wider social context is developed by Painter in chapter twenty two, by neatly examining the changing, but central, relationship between state, governance and economic geography. The section concludes with two pieces focusing upon the links between actors and their role within economic geography. Schoenberger (chapter twenty three) focuses on the firm, situating the cultural and social relations - emphasising the role of power relations – within time and space, and outlining how firm's strategies have to change, and can themselves change, in relation to social processes and pressures. Mitchell on the other hand, focuses upon the important position of 'networks of ethnicity' in aiding and facilitating "an ever-increasing transnational movement of people, information and capital" (403). This section in particular demonstrates the 'contextualisation of the economic' that dominates economic geography presently.

The final part – 'spaces of circulation' – focuses upon movement. Grant (chapter twenty five) calls for theory that treats trade as a complex global mosaic, "a kaleidoscope of individual dynamic geographies of commodities" (413) and faces the three challenges posed by: the changing sectoral composition of global trade; the barriers to global trade; and the role of governments and firms. Leyshon (chapter twenty six) represents an aspect of the 'complex global mosaic' through an overview of the geography of money and finance and how important this is in understanding the social world. The 'complex global mosaic' metaphor is one that could equally be applied to Leitner's chapter (twenty seven) which stresses the need to, through networked-based approaches, understand the complex histories, geographies, activities and experiences of international labour migration. Hanson's chapter on transport geography (twenty eight) and Warf's on telecommunications (twenty nine) demonstrate the importance of these activities in underpinning 'modern' economic activity. Whilst Warf is perhaps writing from a position of 'strength' - he is able to actively critique much of the literature to call for a more rigorous interrogation of the affect of telecommunications on space and place (contra to the popular, and hegemonic, discourse). Hanson attempts to place transport geography on the research agenda once again, noting that research must move beyond a focus on the friction of distance. The final chapter (thirty, by Webber) again is one that perhaps sits a little easily within the book. A chapter of real resource and usefulness, I think it would have perhaps been better earlier in the book. In outlining international political economy, and the implications for geographical research, the chapter provides much of the unity for the diversity that the editors stated as an aim of the book – and that the book delivers. Indeed it is perhaps surprising that there was no chapter at the end to attempt to do this from the editors themselves.

Overall, the book is a fine collection. As individual chapters, or as a broad state-of-play for economic geography, I think the book is an equally useful resource. I fully recommend it to all – but those of us on research studentships will have to wait until it is published in paperback.

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