

EGRG Annual Postgraduate Symposium, 6 May 2009

The annual EGRG Postgraduate Symposium was held on 6 May 2009, hosted by the Geography Department at Queen Mary University of London. The event was opened by Al James (Queen Mary), Neil Coe (Manchester) and Sarah Hall (Nottingham) who stressed the importance of the event for building longstanding relationships with peers that in many cases remain well-beyond PhD study. In his opening remarks, Al outlined the challenges and opportunities presented to early-career graduate students in economic geography following the discipline's 'twists and turns' in recent years. In particular, he explored the methodological implications of the cultural turn and speculated as to how the current global financial and economic crisis might raise new methodological challenges as well as presenting new research questions for economic geographers at all career stages.

Following this, the day was structured around eight papers, divided into three sessions that pointed to the conceptual and empirical diversity within contemporary economic geography. The first session, 'Economic geographies of environmental change', was opened by Alexia Rogers-Wright (Hull). Alexia considered how practices of adaptation rather than revolution to the recurrent threat of flooding might be developed through the existing governance structures within the city of Hull. The second paper was given by Carl Lewis (Hull) who explored the private sector's perception of flood risk and its limited involvement in flood risk governance in the Humber Estuary. Both of these papers point to the exciting research being conducted at the interface between economy and nature. The session concluded with some thought-provoking comments from Martin Hess (Manchester) acting as the discussant. Martin emphasised the need to consider vulnerability as a socially constructed phenomenon the levels of which are determined by the material and social aspects and opportunities of resource use (entitlements) at the individual and community level. This issue is closely linked to the capabilities of different agents to deal with risk, for instance through offloading them onto the more vulnerable parts of society affected, which in turn raises questions regarding moral geographies, spaces of responsibility, and the politics of citizenship. The subsequent general discussion brought out the significance of power asymmetries in the governance of environmental change, as well as the importance of scalar politics of flood adaptation and mitigation involving institutions at various levels.

After lunch the second session 'Economic geographies of post-socialist transition' began with a paper delivered by Adam Novak (Nottingham). Adam adopted a post-colonial perspective to focus on the 'aid activities' of the 10 post-socialist new EU member states as they move from principally being aid recipients to aid donors. Helen Lowther (Newcastle) then presented a discussion of the participation of Polish migrants in cultural activities in the North East of England. Helen's research focusses on the cultural dimensions of economic life and included a detailed consideration of the methodological issues involved in conducting cultural economy informed research. The final paper in this session was given by Piotr Niewiadomski (Manchester) who used a global production networks approach to consider the expansion strategies of international hotel groups in Central and Eastern Europe. Taken together, the three papers clearly demonstrated the conceptual diversity and vitality within economic geographical work exploring post-socialist transition. In addition to reflecting on this, Andrew Jones (Birkbeck, University of London) also

focussed on the methodological issues raised by the papers in his discussant comments. He was keen to stress that whilst the current global economic crisis clearly poses challenges for empirical work, there is still ample opportunity to engage with research participants and, in so doing, develop important new research agendas.

Yajing Li (Queen Mary) opened the final session 'Economic geographies of work and finance'. Yajing developed a conceptually rich analysis of the importance of developing relational understandings of trust through a focus on the operations of a Chinese bank in London's financial district. In so doing, her paper pointed to the fundamentally hybrid nature of globalisation practices. The second paper was given by Rachel Mulhall (Birmingham). Drawing on her own inter-disciplinary background, Rachel described how her very timely research seeks to integrate understandings of organisational resilience to both climatic and financial stress and the methodological challenges associated with such a research agenda. The final paper of the symposium was given by Sejeong Ha's (LSE). Sejeong presented a detailed empirical study that explored the complex relationship between residential tenure and labour market outcomes, particularly in terms of labour market mobility.

The day was brought to a close by Neil Coe (Manchester) in his capacity as discussant and Chair of the EGRG. Neil began by congratulating Franz Huber (Cambridge) on winning the EGRG Working Paper prize for 2009. He then reflected on the common conceptual themes that had emerged during the day, drawing attention to the ways in which much of the research sought to bridge what are often seen as epistemological divides within economic geography associated with questions of network/scale, culture/economy and nature/society. However, in developing such conceptual toolkits, he also reminded us that we need to take the economic geographies of our theories seriously, particularly given the continued Anglo-American centric economic geography. Finally, Neil returned to the question of method that ran throughout the Symposium. He reflected on the implications of a growing number of ESRC Case awards for the type of PhDs conducted within economic geography before emphasising both the challenges and opportunities presented to economic geography by the current financial and economic crisis. After a thought provoking day of discussion and networking amongst speakers and delegates, conversations were continued over drinks and dinner on Brick Lane.

Sarah Hall (University of Nottingham) and Al James (QMUL)