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**Geographies of Production II:  
Political Economic Geographies: A pluralist direction?**

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## **Abstract**

Within economic geography, it has been argued that political economy approaches have diminished in both prevalence and influence to the detriment of both the sub-discipline and to human geography as a whole. This report challenges such a perspective, arguing that political economic geographies remains very much vibrant and engaging in contemporary economic geography and in the way in which economic geographers engages with the nature of the contemporary global economy. It argues that the perceived retreat of political economy approaches corresponds more to a diversification of the ways in which political economic thinking is integrated into more recent economic geography, acknowledging that this does reduce the apparent coherence around a singular articulation or approach to geographical political economy. However, it also seeks to demonstrate through reviewing recent pluralist theoretical work that political economic geography has broadened its theoretical framework and thus made significant contributions to ongoing debates around the geographies of production within the sub-discipline that had not previously been the object of political economic analysis.

**Keywords:** geographical political economy; pluralist economic geography; human geography; Marxian theory.

## 1) Introduction

*From the perspective of mainstream/geographical economics, geographical political economy seems distinctly 'heterodox' - close to such marginalised subfields as radical, post-Keynesian, feminist and ecological economics, and a fellow-traveler with economic sociology and economic anthropology.*  
(Sheppard 2010: 321)

In this second progress report I address an issue which has emerged through several avenues of disciplinary reflection within human and economic geography in recent years: the nature and status of political economic approaches to economic geographies of production. As Sheppard (2010) quoted above refers to, much concern has been articulated around the rise of geographical economics within economics as a discipline, the perceived 'land-grab' from economic geography, and the epistemological gulf between disciplines (c.f. Martin 1999; 2010; Peck 2012). However, the quotation above also belies a further issue: that economic geography as it exists within human geography can for the most part be captured within the categorization of 'geographical political economy' (with the obvious exception of geographers working within the field of geographical economics (e.g. Gibbons & Overman 2012)). Not everyone agrees on this, since elsewhere within economic geography others have argued that political economic approaches to economic geography have been diminished by the engagement with post-prefix epistemological stances (Harvey 2011). The strength and health of political economic thinking has thus been the theme of various (Anglophone) interventions including sessions at leading geographical conferences such as the Association of American Geographers annual meeting as well as national subject review documents (e.g. ESRC 2013) and other disciplinary commentaries. Geographical political economy is thus a much contested category, and one that bears further scrutiny.

The goal of this report is to scrutinize the principal arguments that underpin much of the discussion of geographical political economy in terms of both its nature and status. I want to argue that whilst helpful at one level, Sheppard's contention that much economic geography equates to (pluralist) geographical political economy requires unpacking. In so doing it seeks to address two key issues that have been repeatedly identified: what we might understand a contemporary version of geographical political economy to be, and whether the overtly Marxian forms of geographical political economy that were evident in the 1980s and 1990s have in some way receded. The aim is not to not to raise some polemic by arguing that

political economy is either under threat or conversely that it should be propagated over and above other epistemological stances as the preferred framework for undertaking geographical economic analysis. Rather it seeks to provide a neutral stock-take of several strands of current work within economic geography that draw on a political economic approach. The key argument developed is that geographical political economy in a range of forms is very much alive and well in economic geography, but it has diversified in ways that make it harder to discern a singular school of political economic thinking compared to a couple of decades ago. The further consequence is that any simple opposition of geographical political economic and post-prefixed approaches to economic geography is highly problematic and does not account for the level of conceptual and theoretical cross-fertilization between these various epistemologies. Yet equally, the recent literature has developed a pluralist geographical political economic geography that is not simply categorized in the way that has thus far been suggested (see also Clare & Siemiatycki 2014).

## **2) Competing definitions for a geographical political economy**

A cursory review of geography department research clusters around the world reveals that political economic geography remains a prevalent and ubiquitous category – at least in the ways in which economic geographers label and identify themselves within human geography. Many departments self-identify significant numbers of economic geographers within political economy groups or clusters, albeit under different titles ranging from political economies that variously link to ‘production’, ‘institutions’ or ‘contestation’. Yet few of the profiles of these research groups offer a specific definition of geographical political economy that goes into any more detail than Sheppard’s (2010) broad definition. The latter loosely divides economic geography between a political economy approach (mostly within the discipline of geography) and those grounded in geographical economics or neoclassicalneoliberal economics (mostly within the discipline of economics). Such a definition of geographical political economy is a ‘big tent’ approach which acknowledge that while political economy approaches are often grounded in Marxian thinking, they are ‘by no means reducible to some variant of Marx’s theory of capitalism’ (ibid.: 320).

Sheppard argues that what he defines as geographical political economy has - since the 1990s - ‘diversified remarkably’, primarily under the influence of feminist and ‘post-prefixed epistemologies in such a way as it now embraces many trenchant critics of Marxian economic geography’s economism and capitocentrism’ (ibid.: 320). The common basis for

geographical political economy is that capitalism is ‘conflictual and unstable’, incapable of solving its own internal problems and ‘productive of the very socio-spatial inequalities that its proponents believe it can (at least in principle) overcome’ (ibid.: 320). Added to this, geographical political economy has a shared skepticism of equilibrium, methodological individualism, quantitative theorization and analysis and the separability of the economic from co-evolving socionatural processes (ibid.). According to Sheppard, geographical political economy’s approaches share three starting points: first, that capitalism is just one (albeit hegemonic) way of organizing the economic imperatives of any society and is not necessarily superior to others; second, that geography is not exogenous to the economy but produced alongside economic activities even if these produced spatialities shape ongoing trajectories; and third, that economic processes must be considered in relation to the biophysical, cultural and social processes with which they co-evolve. Sheppard’s argument is that geographical political economists have articulated a rigorous, wide ranging set of theories of the capitalist space economy connecting agency with socio-spatial structure; all of this is quite distinct from geographical economics.

Sheppard thus offers a heterodox view compared to that of mainstream economics, with a key goal of his argument being that engagement with economics from this marginal heterodox position is potentially productive (ibid.: 321). Such a definitional viewpoint – whilst laudable in its goals of identifying the commonalities of economic geographical concern (c.f. Moseley 2011) – is challenging and problematic in at least two ways beyond the scope of the economic geography / geographical economics axis. Firstly, and perhaps self-evidently, it glosses over the significance differences in how the legacy of Marxian concepts and theories are used or not by economic geographers and the way in which the significant ‘philosophical and epistemological divisions and disagreements’ between these divergent strands of thought have produced theoretical divergence (Sheppard 2012: 321). Whilst Sheppard’s intervention may be useful for distinguishing different economic geographies within human geography and economics, this generalized view of a broader political economic legacy in economic geography is not adequate either to understand the diverse ways in which current political economic thinking is developing within economic geography, nor what future directions political economic thinking might take in develop better theories of complex global economic forms. Second, and no less challenging, is that this ‘broad tent’ approach sits uncomfortably with the tighter epistemological deployment of geographical political economy in recent work that continues to utilize the more recognizable or conventional Marxian approach to geographical political economy stemming back several

decades (e.g. Smith 1984; Harvey 1989; 1996). Such work is critical of some economic geographical work that is less clear in its intellectual lineage to conventional political economy (e.g. the GPN, evolutionary or relational economic geographical literatures) for its lack of engagement with inequality (Prudham & Henan 2011) and thus is by implication based on a narrower definition of geographical political economy.

In the remainder of this paper I want to argue that there is scope to move this debate forward productively by recognizing the way in which contemporary economic geography has continued to incorporate political economic ideas and examine in greater detail Sheppard's proposition that it has 'diversified remarkably'. This diversification is not well understood either by a simple application of the idea that economic geography outside of neoclassical geographical economics can be largely be subsumed in the category of geographical political economy, nor that the remaining narrower work framed by the legacy of earlier Marxian work in the 1980s and 1990s is the only body of economic geography that warrants this label either. I develop this argument by considering three distinct recent literatures within economic geography concerned with the geography of production which provide insight into the complex nature of political economic thought within contemporary economic geography.

### **3) The diversification of political economic geographies**

Marxian geographical political economy - as framed by the work of David Harvey, Neil Smith and others during the 1980s and 1990s - continues as an identifiable body of work within human geography although its scope has arguable become more tightly-focused on macro-scale issues of global political economy (Harvey 2005). Harvey has continued to make significant interventions reworking and redeveloping his Marxian geographical political theorization of global capitalism, engaging at various points with capitalist contradiction (Harvey 2011b) and the scope for resistance to dominant neoliberal or post-neoliberal underpinnings of the contemporary global economy (Harvey 2014). The lineage from Marxian epistemology remains clear in his geographical historical materialism and his recent contributions restate the importance of the meta-theoretical framework of capitalist development and operation (ibid.). However, whilst significant, in terms of the economic geography of production this literature has been less directly concerned with theoretical development of the geographies of production at the meso- and micro- scales. I want to argue that beyond this continuation of this 'purist' geographical political economic geography,

there has been an extensive permeation and evolution of political economic thinking into a wide and diverse range of schools of thinking across economic geography. This amounts to more than a diversification of political economic theorization in any simplistic sense. I consider here the way in which this diversification has occurred in three strands of recent work concerned with the economic geographies of production.

### **3.1 Evolutionary political economic geographies**

The emergence of evolutionary economic geography (EEG) in the last two decades within economic geography has already spawned a significant review literature within the discipline and been the subject of several previous reports in this journal (Coe 2012). Rather, the more specific concern of this current report is a strand of this work which has sought to integrate EEG with political economic approaches to geography. This has emerged as evolutionary economic geographers have sought to respond to critiques which question the capacity of existing theories to adequately theorise the nature of the agency shaping the evolutionary process within regions.

EEG has largely concentrated on the role of firms or groups of firms as agents, with some more recent work beginning to seek to integrate an understanding of institutions (Boschma & Frenken 2011; Martin 2011; Martin & Sunley 2014). However, both these firm and institutional strands of work have been criticized for treating these agents as ‘black box’ units and for lacking scrutiny of the underlying factors shaping firm or institutional agency (Pike *et al* 2009). It is this critical movement within EEG that has pushed theorists to look to political economic understandings of firm and institutional agency. For example, Mackinnon (2009) argues that this limitation to the capacity of EEG to explain regional economic development can be addressed by integrating a political economic theorization of how capital-labour relations and state regularities have most influence on territorial disparities. Similarly, Essletzbichler (2009) argues that the emphasis on capital-labour conflict is insufficient to capture the specificities of the multiple power relationships that shape the evolution of regional economic landscapes. In contrast, he argues that it is only one of many progenitors of change in evolutionary theory’ (*ibid.*: 163) and that a better conception of power is needed.

In response to these critiques, recent work drawing on ideas of engaged pluralism in economic geography (Plummer & Sheppard 2006; Barnes & Sheppard 2010) has suggested scope for better conceptualising agency and in particular power relationships by drawing on several different theoretical frameworks. Hassink *et al* (2014) follow this line of argument in



suggesting that EEG can benefit from a pluralist approach that draws on political economic, institutional and relational thinking. With regard to the utility of insight drawn from a political economic perspective, they suggest it can tackle ‘the conceptual shortcomings’ of EEG insofar as offering ‘a better approach for comprehensively theorizing power, social agency and particularly multi-scalar impacts on the formation of economics landscapes (ibid.: 1304). They are critical of a division between EEG and Marxist political economy that ‘presents evolutionary economic geography as self-sustaining but at the cost of setting “us” against “them”’. Rather they argue that a ‘fragmented’ pluralism (in epistemological terms) is ‘arguably necessary to constitute a new paradigm at the beginning’ and ‘can be inspiring for progressing new paradigms such as EEG’ (ibid. 1304).

These arguments have been both advocated as a wider theoretical trajectory for EEG to embrace (Sanz-Ibanez & Clave 2014; Kogler 2015) and also have begun to be applied to a growing body of literature which is seeking to integrate political economic ideas with EEG. Hassink and colleagues have sought to demonstrate the utility of how better conceptualizations of power and agency can be developed in EEG through empirical work on clusters in, for example, the shipbuilding industry in South Korea (Shin & Hassink 2011) and new tourist industrial development in China (Ma & Hassink 2014). Others have integrated these arguments into more recent work aiming to further develop concepts of path dependence in EEG (c.f. Greco & Defavio 2014).

### **3.2 Environmental political economies of production**

The last five to ten years has also seen the growth of another body of economic geographical work that continues to draw heavily on political economic ideas, but which equally is not always readily identifiable under the political economy label; this is work within environmental economic geography. This literature has strong roots in the geographical political economy of the 1980s and 1990s, with a key contribution in this respect being Harvey’s work on social justice, global production and the environment (Harvey 1996). Harvey turned his attention to environmental questions, reworking his geographical historical materialist approach to seek to engage with environmental politics and the interaction of the global capitalist economy with questions of environmental sustainability. In the subsequent decades, economic geographers continued to draw on this body of work in thinking about the interactions between neoliberalism and the global environment (e.g. Bridge 2000; Robertson 2004; Bakker 2005), what different versions of a green capitalist global economy might look like or the way in which a transition to environmental sustainability may be achieved (e.g.

Bridge & McManus 2000; Marsden *et al* 2002). However, I want to argue that the clear theoretical lineage between this recent literature and the kind of work undertaken by Harvey and others in the 1990s - implied by Sheppard's overview - is rather more complicated than a singular conception of geographical political economy suggests. As with evolutionary work, whilst many political economic concepts are alive and well within contemporary environmental economic geography, the nature of the political economic theories being developed are significantly different insofar as they are firmly embedded in diverse and hybrid conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Again if seeking a 'pure' geographical political economic engagement, then it has become more difficult to reduce these approaches to one political economic approach, but conversely the significance of political economic concepts and theoretical arguments are no less in these contemporary multi-theoretical analyses.

To illustrate this argument we can consider recent literatures within environmental economic geography, which build upon the earlier geographical environmental political economy but considerably diversify its theoretical palate of tools in a manner that is incongruous with Sheppard's all-encompassing definition of geographical political economy. First, for example, is work which seeks to engage with the interaction of capitalism with the global environment. In this respect, Castree (2010) seeks to develop a theoretical argument around the coincident occurrence of environmental and economic crises in the contemporary period. Firmly grounded in Marxian theories of capitalist accumulation and crisis, Castree also integrates arguments drawn from Karl Polanyi as well as other socio-political theorists. In this respect the analysis of how environmental and economic crises are embedded in neoliberalist contexts develops a more pluralist political economic approach that moves some way beyond the environmental geographical political economy of the 1990s. Furthermore, recently Castree and co-authors have developed similarly pluralist political economic theorization of environment/ nature and economy concerned with, for example, how the recent global financial crises impacted on the scope for a sustainable transition and the capacity to develop 'green infrastructures' (Castree & Christophers 2015). This work integrates a range of social and political theories with roots in actor-network arguments about nature/society, as well as theories of sociodemocracy, in developing an argument for ways in which the global financial system might channel liquidity into less ecological harmful infrastructures in the coming decades (and see also Felli & Castree 2012; Castree & Henderson 2014).

A second literature straddles political / economic geography and is concerned with the development of specific industries or aspects to the transition to an environmentally sustainable global economy.. Examples include Bridge & Le Billon's (2013), Huber (2013)'s and Bradshaw's (Bradshaw 2013) contributions on the global energy industry. In the case of Bridge and LeBillon, their recent contribution argues that the oil sector, both in terms of its firm actors and institutional governance, is in urgent need of reform if goals of environmental sustainability and a low carbon economy are to be achieved. Their analysis is political economic in terms of its conceptual lexicon but draws on a diverse set of social scientific theories including geopolitical theory, institutional theory and organizational theory to seek to understand – amongst a range of issues - the nature and behaviour of large oil transnationals, how their relationship with governments shape investment outcomes and how oil industry finance shapes the producer-consumer relations. Again political economic concepts and ideas permeate the analysis but are present with a pluralist use of a range of other forms of social, political and economic theory.

### **3.3 Cultural political economies**

A final strand of contemporary economic geography which continues to draw heavily on a broad political economy approach overlaps with the substantial body of work in social, cultural, political and feminist geography. This recent literature is often (but not always) within a cultural economic approach (c.f. James 2006) but in drawing on a political economic legacy brings a diverse and multi-theoretical approach to understanding various industr sectors and the development of firms within those sectors. . Again, such work is not always identified with the label 'political economy' and is seen as removed from the geographical political economy of the 1980s and 1990s, but I would argue in fact remains heavily indebted to this earlier work in conceptual and epistemological terms.

A good example is Molloy and Lerner's (2013) recent work on the New Zealand fashion industry and gendered work. The approach draws on multiple strands of theory, including geographical political economic analyses of neoliberalism, theories of gendered work and the workplace, contemporary theories of global class formation and cultural economic analysis on creative industries in the global economy. Molloy and Lerner deploy these diverse theoretical approaches to argue that the development of this fashion industry cannot be understood without understanding the way in which it is on not based on pure market-based ideas but is the emergent product of a range of hybrid (and often contradictory) logics. They argue that the nature of what might be meant by neoliberal governmentality can

only be understood in this New Zealand case through the context of its interactions between the situated practices of female entrepreneurs and local and global policy frameworks. In this respect, the analysis makes use of a range of diverse theoretical arguments around neoliberalism, (Foucaultian) governmentality, class, work and gender that all have lineages in part traceable to different strands of political economy (and with a Marxian inheritance) but which together is not easily categorizable as purely political economic analysis.

This contribution exemplifies the pluralist approach of a wider literature within this strand of cultural economic geography. Aside from similar work on the nature on identity in the fashion industry (c.f. Rantisi 2014), other examples include Werner's work on gendered labour in the garment industry in the Dominican Republic (Werner 2012) and Hughes *et al* (2015) who seek to bring insights from both global production network (GPN) and cultural political economy approaches to bear on the South African flower industry.

#### **4) Conclusion**

The three distinctive strands to contemporary political economies of production identified in this report do not in any way represent a comprehensive assessment of the way in which political economic approaches remain at the heart of much recent economic geography. A series of other strands of recent work could have easily been added or substituted, space permitting, including substantial bodies of work on the global financial system and the geographies of finance system (e.g. Wojcik 2012; 2013) or labour market geographies (c.f. Coe & Jordhus-Lier 2011) to name but two of the more obvious literatures. However, such work is covered by other progress reports in this journal and the point of this report is not to provide an all-encompassing overview, but to demonstrate the diversity of the ways in which different forms and inflections of political economic thinking are current across economic geography.

In that respect, the key argument I want to reiterate by way of conclusion is that debates about the future of one or more versions of political economic geography need to become more sensitive to the subtleties of different approaches and growing prevalence of economic geography work that is diverse and pluralist in its theoretical framing. The simplistic complaint that political economic geography has receded as a sub-disciplinary body of work is not supported by recent evidence, once it is appreciated that the legacy of 1980s and 1990s political economy geography has diversified in a wide range of rich and fruitful directions. In many respects, assessing the contemporary significance of political

economic concepts and theories to the current literature on the geography of production provides some scope for both questioning and responding to the challenge that Peck (2012) poses in contending the sub-discipline exists in some form of 'island life' (c.f. Taylor 2012, and also Lerner 2012). However, the pluralist forms of theory developing are equally not well served by Sheppard's characterization of the nature of economic geography as being a heterodox geographical political economy. Whilst this generalization has its uses in the context of the wider social sciences, it is too insensitive to important epistemological differences that remain and it is important that the full breadth and potential of the way in which much of the contemporary economic geographical work is engaging with multiple theoretical frameworks is recognized and developed further in order to benefit the intellectual health of the sub-discipline.

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