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*Edited by Trevor J. Barnes, Jamie Peck, Eric Sheppard, and Adam Tickell*
Dedicated to the memory of
Robert G. Peck

1936–2002
The Editors

Trevor J. Barnes is Professor of Geography at the University of British Columbia. His previous publications include *A Companion to Economic Geography* (co-edited with Eric Sheppard, Blackwell, 2001).


Eric Sheppard is Professor of Geography at the University of Minnesota. He is the author of *The Capitalist Space Economy* and *A World of Difference* and the co-editor with Trevor Barnes of *A Companion to Economic Geography* (Blackwell, 2001) and with Robert McMaster of *Scale and Geographic Inquiry* (Blackwell, 2003).

Adam Tickwell is Professor of Human Geography at the University of Bristol. He is editor of *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* and review editor of the *Journal of Economic Geography*. 
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Introduction: Reading Economic Geography

**Eric Sheppard, Trevor J. Barnes, Jamie Peck, and Adam Tickell**

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**The Stuff of Economic Geography**

Economic geographers study why, where, and when things are produced: food, shelter, commodities of all kinds, money, cultural meanings, and landscapes. But what do economic geographers produce? Economic geographers, like other natural and human scientists, produce inscriptions – written accounts of the nature of the world, and explanations of it. If writing is the output, reading is one input: The two are utterly interlinked, and co-produced. Economic geographers read the inscriptions of others, and themselves, rearranging and reinterpreting them to produce their own inscriptions, which are in turn read by others, who engage in yet further writing. So turns the world of economic geography. The student of economic geography, then, is first and foremost a reader and a writer – a consumer and producer of inscriptions.

Some may question our claim that economic geography is primarily about reading and writing. While this does describe well how economic geographers (indeed, all scientists) spend much of their time, surely there is more to economic geography? What about data collection and analysis, observation and fieldwork, conversations and debates, interviews and surveys, political interventions and policy work? While at times scientists have sought to give a privileged status to data and facts, it is now widely recognized that they too are a kind of inscription – a description of the world. Secondary databases, such as the census, are produced by particular agencies for particular purposes and represent their accounts of what matters in the world. Even when we go out and collect our own information on our own terms, that information is generally largely a social construct. A landscape, for example, is an inscription of human activities on the earth’s surface – either directly, as in the case of an urban neighborhood or an agricultural landscape, or indirectly, as in how even the most remote and seemingly natural landscapes are now being transformed by human-induced global climate change. Biophysical processes are also important in shaping the world we seek to understand – constituting non-human inscriptions – but even these have to be read and interpreted by economic
geographers. A fieldtrip is a bit like a trip to the library; we start out with ideas about what we are looking for, sort through the materials deposited there by others, read and interpret them, and then write about them. Of course, economic geographers engage in practices other than reading and writing: operating overhead projectors and Xerox machines, talking with corporate executives and domestic workers, visiting Italian industrial districts and Turkish villages. These would not get us far, however, without reading and writing.

In terms of the inscriptions we produce, surely these are more than “just” writing? Again, practicing scientists often claim that scientific writing is fundamentally different from that of, say, novelists: It provides a definitive analysis of reality, as opposed to story-telling. Yet, again, it is now widely recognized that such claims to the objectivity of scientific accounts are problematic (Longino, 2002). While scientific writing is not the same as that of novelists, scientists also tell stories – about how the world works – that reflect their preexisting beliefs, understandings, and interpretations. By the same token, novelists often seek to provide an account of how the world works through their novels, which, like the scientists’ essays, can be more or less compelling, plausible, and insightful. (David Lodge’s recent novel Thinks . . . provides a humorous narrative of how scientists’ and novelists’ accounts overlap.)

If reading and writing is the stuff of economic geography, then a Reader should be more than just a collection of economic geography’s “greatest hits.” Our aim in producing this collection is to help students of economic geography (including ourselves) become better readers and writers. Our strategy is to provide what we think are effective and provocative examples of writing by economic geographers, and some guidance about how to read them critically and place them in context. In doing this, we have faced a series of dilemmas that we have attempted to negotiate. First, there is no canon in economic geography, that is, there is not a common understanding of how to “do” economic geography nor of those articles that are the “classics.” Although, as we argue below, this is one of the strengths of economic geography, it made our editorial task difficult. This is compounded by the fact that any selection may well contribute to the canonization of those essays included – and the marginalization and disaffection of those authors excluded. The sheer quantity of writing by economic geographers poses a separate problem. There are, perhaps, a thousand practicing professional economic geographers worldwide. If each of us writes and publishes on average, say, 15,000 words a year, then over a fifteen-year period that would amount to 225,000,000 words. We only had room for less than one-thousandth of that output here.

Rather than providing a definitive selection, then, we offer only a partial collection reflecting our own readings, presuppositions, and opinions. Our choices can only be justified within the context in which it was produced, summarized below. Yet, we hope that even though others inevitably will disagree with our choices, students of economic geography will find our guidance to reading economic geography helpful. Our approach underlines the variegated character of contemporary economic geography in a way that says something about the restlessness and openness of the subdiscipline. Its very dynamism and differentiation is the reason that there is no universally accepted canon, and our selections here have consequently been made in such a way as to highlight some of the diverse ways in which eco-
nomic geographies have been conceived, practiced, and written. Part of our task has been to illustrate how the boundaries of economic geography have been breached, stretched, and remade, but at the same time it is important to hold on to what is distinctively economic-geographic. Today, “being an economic geographer” is not just a matter of institutional affiliation, nor is it simply a reflection of substantive empirical concerns; it symbolizes a deeper set of commitments, inclinations, and sensibilities. From our particular historically and geographically situated perspective, the work of economic geographers involves mapping out the geographies of localization and globalization; exploring the geographical foundations of economic structures and restructuring processes; developing accounts for uneven spatial development in the economy; documenting and explaining the spatiality of economic processes; and uncovering the social and institutional bases of economic performance, and the ways in which these vary between places and across scales.

The Broader Context: A Brief History of Economic Geography

The field of economic geography dates back to commercial geography in the nineteenth century – which attempted to compile and give meaning to the geography of economic production, often as a handmaiden to the colonial adventures of European powers (Barnes, 2000). Its current form, direction, and status are largely a result of a remarkable efflorescence of writing in the English-speaking world over the past fifty years (Scott, 2000). Beginning in the early 1960s, economic geography became the primary vehicle through which a new way of doing human geography became popular. The quantitative revolution refashioned geography as a theoretical discipline, whereby geographers sought to explain the spatial organization of human activity rather than just to describe and map it; and as a positivist discipline, developing deductive theories about the world and determining their validity by seeing whether they accurately predict observed spatial patterns. Economic geography proved well suited to this agenda; it could be easily quantified, and there were well-developed deductive theories in economics that some German economists and geographers (notably Johan Heinrich von Thünen, Alfred Weber, August Lösch, and Walter Christaller) had already been adapting to predict the location of economic activities on the basis of rational economic decision-making. It was in the English-speaking world, and to a lesser extent Sweden, that this approach developed particularly rapidly. Initial research adapted statistical methods to test the location theories of von Thünen et al., leading subsequently to new statistical methods and elaborations of these location theories into a rich research program that also gained the attention of urban and regional economists, and even a new interdisciplinary field of study – regional science.

This approach to economic geography has remained an important field of endeavor, but to a significant degree it has been taken up by trained economists rather than trained geographers. The work of Paul Krugman has been particularly influential in recent years, stamping his own personality and engaged writing on this research program (Fujita, Krugman, and Venables, 1999), thereby catalyzing renewed interest from some influential economists under the moniker of the “new” economic geography. Some geographers have protested, with justification, that their
contributions within this research program in the 1970s–1990s have been largely ignored, and many have found the program irrelevant to their current preoccupations. But there has been a high-profile attempt to catalyze a conversation between economists and geographers around these issues (Clark, Gertler, and Feldman, 2000), culminating in the establishment of a new journal in 2001, *The Journal of Economic Geography*.

Among trained geographers, the quantitative revolution bequeathed to economic geography an interest in, and commitment to, theory, but neoclassical economic-influenced location theories and positivism have largely been replaced with a succession of different approaches. Beginning in the mid-1970s, political economy became influential. Inspired by the classical economics of Marx, this approach has focused on how the political and economic forces of capitalism shape the space-economy (Harvey, 1982; Swyngedouw, 2000). Economic landscapes are explained as an evolutionary and conflict-laden consequence of contestation among social classes mediated by the state, in contrast to the harmonious equilibrium outcome of rational economic choice favored by location theory. At the same time, with quantitative geography tarred by the brush of positivism, there was a methodological shift away from mathematical models and statistical testing towards a more qualitative, case-study-oriented approach, often grounded in critical realism (Sayer, 1984; Plummer, 2000).

During the 1990s, political economy in turn came under fire, as geographers began to criticize it for over-emphasizing the importance of economic forces relative to culture, for under-playing the importance of human agency in shaping socio-spatial structures, and for its inattentiveness to gender. As a consequence, there is now an unprecedented diversity of approaches to economic geography among geographers, with the creative surge in poststructuralist, feminist, and cultural theoretic approaches (Gibson-Graham, 2000; Oberhauser, 2000; Thrift, 2000), and a related turn to ethnographies and discourse analysis. These approaches emphasize that adequate forms of explanation in economic geography must involve critical reassessments of what we mean by terms like production and consumption, seeking redefinitions that highlight previously neglected aspects of these processes. The boundaries of economic processes do not conveniently coincide with those of firms or labor markets, or those established by censuses or national accounting systems. So, a focus on wage work, for example, can obscure the role of households as places of production, while neglecting the role of women (and other carers) in the process of social reproduction. It is characteristic of much recent work in economic geography to unveil these previously marginalized phenomena, partly in service of the more general argument that economic processes, and the places where production and consumption occur, are shaped by the cultural contexts within which they are embedded. Yet in many senses the research program remains grounded within the broad questions motivating the original forays into political economy: Understanding how the geographical organization of economic activities (now much more broadly defined) is both shaped by, and shapes, the evolution of economic, political, social, and cultural processes; processes that themselves are constituted by the deliberate actions of individuals, and by the social structures and processes of identity formation shaping those actions.
The Immediate Context: The Blackwell Companion

This Reader was conceived in parallel with the Blackwell Companion to Economic Geography (Sheppard and Barnes, 2000). The Companion sought to highlight the predominant focus of geographers working in economic geography, and was organized to reflect the range of theoretical approaches and substantive topics that constitute this diverse research program. It is the richness, breadth, and ambition of this research program that makes economic geography a particularly vibrant area of study at present. Moving beyond the traditional questions of economics, contemporary economic geographers examine what is meant by “economic,” and how the economic co-evolves in space with other societal, cultural, political, and environmental processes. One consequence is that what once were considered the “boundaries” of economic geography – say, the interface with environmental issues, gender relations, or the state – are now especially intensive zones of activity. There is no longer a single core or “center” even of Anglo-American economic geography, but a differentiated terrain of debates, emergent questions, fashionable topics, and enduring concerns. Economic geography may defy most attempts at codification and classification: It is not easily bounded, nor can it be easily located within a dominant methodological or theoretical schema; it is fidgety and somewhat unruly, and hardly ever unified or cohesive. But this also means that it is rarely dull.

The original Companion was organized into five sections, a basic structure that has been duplicated in this volume. Part I, Worlds of Economic Geography, illustrates the variety of theoretical approaches favored by economic geographers, emphasizing political economy, post-structuralism, feminism, and cultural and institutional approaches. Essays illustrating each of these traditions have been selected here. Part II, Realms of Production, focuses on traditional themes of economics, to examine how they are addressed within geography: Production, labor, firms, competition, growth, and technical change. The essays selected include political economic, post-structural, and feminist approaches to production, firms, regional growth, and work. Part III, Resource Worlds, seeks to bring attention to, and catalyze research on, the relationship between the economy and the biophysical environment – a long-standing area of interest in economic geography that has received less attention within the current research program. Themes emphasized here, as in the Companion, include agriculture, resources, and the production of nature, from political economic, cultural theoretic, and feminist perspectives. Part IV, Social Worlds, was designed to emphasize one of economic geography’s principal achievements in recent years – recognizing that economic processes cannot be analyzed in isolation from society. Gender relations, class, governance, and the state, and their relationship to space, are the foci of the essays selected here. Finally, Part V, Spaces of Circulation, was developed (like Part III) to refocus attention on some long-standing issues in economic geography that have not had such a high priority in recent research. Beginning with the spatial implications of Sayer’s critical realism, and reinforced by more recent interest in territories, local embeddedness, and scale, the nature and implications of the ways in which places are systematically connected together across space have received less attention recently. Connectivity, as expressed through transportation and communications technologies, and the movements of commodities, people, capital, and ideas, is the subject-matter of this section. The
essays selected here examine the spatiality of telecommunications, and the connectivity of places through flows of capital and migration.

Selection Strategies

We did not set out to select the best articles ever written in economic geography. Indeed, we do not believe that any such list can be drawn up; its creation would imply the existence of an economic geographical canon that is neither extant nor desirable. It would be possible to compile a list of the most influential papers, based on their measurable influence (say, by the frequency that they are cited), or the ways in which they can be argued to have indirectly influenced subsequent research trajectories, but such approaches are also problematic. For example, the frequency that an article is cited is not a reliable indicator of influence, notwithstanding the popularity of this crude measure among university administrators seeking to quantify research performance. The culture of citation differs across disciplines and research communities within disciplines, and motivations for citation extend beyond formally acknowledging influential ideas to include: marking the intellectual program to which you would like to belong; citing your friends, influential people whose friendship you seek, or what you think potential referees will have expected you to read; citing those whose work you think is poor; and showing off how much you know (Curry, 1991).

Selection is made more difficult by the sheer volume of publication over the past fifteen years, by our own inability to read it all or even recall what we’ve read, and by language barriers. Despite passing familiarity with a couple of European languages, we are not in a position to survey the relevant non-English literature in any knowledgeable way. To the extent that English has become the *lingua franca* for international scholarship in economic geography, this language barrier might be perceived as less limiting than, say, Japanese. Yet, as noted above, this self-limitation of course also serves to reinforce this English canon, and any broader Eurocentrism that it entails. There is substantial scholarship in economic geography that is not translated into English. The writings by scholars in other languages that are translated are naturally written in such a way as to fit within the English-speaking debates, thus often seeming derivative of the English language literature. It is therefore commonly asserted that the English-speaking realm dominates the research frontiers of economic geography. At the same time, however, we do not wish to underestimate the possibility that very different approaches to the field already exist in the non-English scholarship, or that exposure to these ideas would substantially enrich the English language scholarship. We look forward, therefore, to the development of forums for economic geographers to engage in a multilingual exchange of expertise, from which a very different kind of Reader, relevant for a much broader audience, might emerge.

Our goals are modest: To select articles that reflect our own collective and situated understanding of what is worth reading in the English language. We sought, first, articles that illustrate at least one of the five themes shaping contemporary economic geography as summarized above. In addition, we wanted to include as authors a number of the more influential scholars in the field, people with whose writing we believe any student of economic geography should have some familiar-
ity. Since this volume is conceived of as a complement to the Companion, authors whose essays already appear in the Companion were not our first choice. Yet, we also selected articles that we find particularly interesting or especially relevant to the thematic structure of the two books, and tried to stay away from conflicts of interest (such as selecting articles by our own students, or ourselves). We sought to provide some balance across the different theoretical perspectives currently shaping geographic work in this field, by gender and location (both of the authors and of the empirical research). Needless to say, this kind of winnowing down and balancing is a very difficult and subjective exercise. In another context, even the same four editors might well have made different choices. Inclusion also entails exclusion, and we can only hope that colleagues who feel left out appreciate the complexity, and understand the contingent nature, of our choices.

Even our choice of just 25 articles from this productive and diverse field transcended limits imposed by the economics of publishing. Constrained to some 200,000 words, we were unable to realize our original aim of publishing the articles in their entirety. While our original goal was to let the readers decide what is important to them, this also abrogates some of our responsibility as editors to provide a representative sample of articles that also is accessible to a student audience, as one referee of the book proposal pointed out. Thus, we decided to include more articles, selectively edited, rather than just three per section in their entirety. In editing the articles, we have again imposed our own particular reading on the writings of others – seeking to make the essays more accessible when necessary, and highlighting those aspects of them that make them relevant to their inclusion in the volume. Some were sufficiently cogent to be included almost in the original length; others had to be cut in half. We cut out all abstracts, acknowledgments, and footnotes from the original papers, and extensive sections that were of limited relevance to their role within this volume. We also engaged in more detailed editing to increase their accessibility, in our view, and to reduce their length. We have not indicated all the places where this more detailed editing occurred, as that would have substantially reduced the legibility of our selections. Our editorial selections, of which parts to include, do not reflect some general and definitive judgment as to which are the “best parts” of an article, but only which parts are most relevant to our context and goals. As always, we urge students of economic geography (or any discipline) to take these readings as only a starting point: Always read the original writings, rather than second-hand accounts or others’ abbreviations of the originals; and make your own judgments about which articles are of most use for you, by going beyond edited books and course bibliographies to undertake your own survey of the literature.

**Critical Reading**

Each section of the Reader is prefaced by a brief introduction, placing the readings in the context of the development of thinking around this theme, and providing some specific questions to ponder with respect to the readings in that section. Here, we offer some tips about reading in a constructively critical manner. This may sound time consuming, but think for a minute about how much effort it took to write the article!
• **Gain an overall sense of the argument.** Before reading an article in detail, peruse the introduction and conclusion to get a sense of the research questions driving the scholarship, and the overall argument. A detailed reading will be more meaningful if you can situate it within this overall understanding.

• **Engage in a detailed initial reading.** Take detailed notes, jotting down major arguments advanced, and figuring out how the various parts of the article contribute to constructing the overall argument.

• **Learn the terminology.** Terms mean different things in different contexts, so it is important to know how they are used within economic geography. Make notes of terms you do not understand, and look them up on the Internet or in an encyclopedia or dictionary of human geography (Hanson, 2001; Johnston et al., 2001).

• **Pay attention to writing.** Think about the writing style of the author. What makes it effective, or ineffective? Is the style appropriate for the task at hand? Is the author trying to overwhelm you with fancy words, jargon, and obscure references, thereby undermining your ability to criticize the article, or is he or she adept at making complex ideas accessible and highlighting the most important points?

• **Contextualize the essay.** Determine how authors situate themselves. Which theoretical or philosophical perspective is being adopted? Which kinds of research do the authors engage with, or ignore? How does the article fit within their trajectory of work (visiting authors’ web sites often helps)?

• **Take little on faith.** Do not be satisfied with authors’ renditions of others’ arguments, or their interpretations of empirical material. Wherever possible, go back to the sources, and read critically the various inscriptions that the authors mobilize in support of their argument.

• **Engage in an internalist critique.** An internalist critique pays attention to how well authors achieve the goals they set for themselves. This is essential to any constructive critical reading. Since economic geography is such a diverse field, it is too easy to dismiss an article for taking what you believe to be the wrong general approach, or for asking questions in which you are not interested. This kind of externalist critique (below) is important, but is insufficient. An internalist critique gives due respect to the author and the effort he or she invested. Based on your understanding of the article, how convincing is the overall argument? Is the theoretical argument rigorous, and the use of empirical evidence appropriate and convincing, with respect to the norms of the scholarship within which the article is situated? If not, how could it be improved?

• **Engage in an externalist critique.** What important questions/issues regarding the topic have been omitted in the article? What other approaches to the topic could the author have taken? How would choosing a different approach affect the overall research questions and methodologies? What might be the relative value, in your view, of a different approach?

• **Be reflexive.** Reflect on the critiques you have developed, and how they are shaped by your own personal and intellectual biography (What has interested you? What have you been taught to value? What constitutes your identity and interests?). Use this as an opportunity to reflect on the context from which your critique stems, and to challenge your own preconceptions. To learn from others’
scholarship you have to engage with the research and even change your mind. Finally, ask the ethical question of whether your critical assessment is the kind that you would like to receive from someone reading your essays.

Critical reading is central to the reproduction of economic geography as a vital field of scholarly inquiry. Constructive criticism can contribute to advancing knowledge within a particular research program. It can also lay the foundation for a productive engagement among the different approaches of economic geography (Longino, 2002). At present, different approaches too often seem to be like ships passing in the night; the latest fashions are put on display while last month’s styles are scuppered. Effective writing also requires the reflexive application of critical reading skills to our own inscriptions.

Everyone who reads economic geography can, through critical reading, participate in the production of economic geographic knowledge. We thus invite readers to contribute to the vitality of the field by developing and articulating their own critical readings.

NOTES

1. In making this analogy, we do not wish to suggest that fieldtrips can be substituted by trips to the library. To the contrary: arguably economic geography is becoming impoverished because we spend too much time in the library and on the Internet and too little in the field.

2. By “research program” we mean a school of thought that emerges in a discipline, sharing a worldview and a common understanding about what are the most important research questions and how to go about answering them (Lakatos, 1970). Intellectual progress within economic geography, as in any discipline, does not proceed in a steady direction from poor to excellent understandings of the subject matter, but rather proceeds in fits and starts, as older research programs run out of steam, and new ones attempt to replace them.

3. The academic convention when quoting is to indicate every word left out with an “ellipse” . . . We have dispensed with this convention here because space constraints meant that our editing was sometimes extensive and we did not want our editorial presence to be unnecessarily intrusive.
Part I  Worlds of Economic Geography
Editors’ Introduction: Paradigms Lost

Trevor J. Barnes, Adam Tickell, Jamie Peck, and Eric Sheppard

David Harvey’s essay, which begins this section, is called “The difference a generation makes.” It would make an apt title for this editorial introduction. The age span that separates us four editors is less than a generation, but the kind of economic geography into which each of us was first socialized as undergraduates was radically different. Sheppard attended one of the iconic centers of quantitative, model-based geographical training of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Bristol University, and imbibed the purity of those methods. Barnes went to University College London during the mid-1970s, by which time political economic change was in the air, resulting in an incongruous educational mix of Markov chain and Marxian value analysis, sometimes within the same lecture. When Peck finished his BA at Manchester during the early 1980s, there was only one approach to economic geography – political economy, solidified by the publication of Doreen Massey’s (1984) watershed book, Spatial Divisions of Labour, which for Peck made everything written before seem irrelevant. Finally, when Tickell completed his degree in 1987, again at Manchester, political economy was still central, but there was also the first whiff of a social and cultural sensibility, linked to discussions of gender and local culture (later culminating in the locality project; Cooke, 1989). The difference a generation makes in economic geography, then, is at least three different paradigms.1

That term paradigm comes from the work of the historian and philosopher of science, Thomas Kuhn (1962), and is found in his classic, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. There is some debate over what exactly he meant – critics say that there are over twenty separate definitions of paradigm within his slim book – but the gist is clear enough. A paradigm is a way of looking at the world, like Galileo’s heliocentric view of the solar system, or David Harvey’s class-based (Marxist) view of industrial capitalism. Kuhn was also keen to stress that a paradigm includes an affiliated set of practices that bind practitioners to a common culture and social group. That is, paradigms are not just ethereal abstractions, but are embodied in people, in their relationships and interactions, in institutions, in artifacts, and in a culture’s very form of life. This is what made Kuhn’s book itself revolutionary: he recognized that academic enquiry, even of the most rarefied form, is never just academic.
For this reason, changing paradigms can be fraught, the stakes and consequence sometimes enormous. Galileo was locked up by the Inquisition for suggesting a change in paradigms from geocentrism to heliocentrism, while Darwin was (and still is) denounced in pulpits, legislatures, and court rooms for favoring an evolutionary paradigm over a creationist one. In economic geography, the consequences of paradigm change have not been quite so dramatic, although it is still likely that some assistant professors and lecturers have been denied tenure or promotion, and certain that some students have done less well in their exams and projects, because of the paradigms that they held. In economic geography there have been some famous paradigm quarrels, such as the mid-1950s Hartshorne–Schaefer debate signaling a move from regional geography to spatial science, or the mid-1970s Berry–Harvey exchange in which the spatial scientist Berry took on Harvey's Marxism on its home turf of Antipode, or yet again the early 1990s Harvey–Massey dispute in which Massey castigated Harvey's Marxism for omitting the culture of gender. In line with Kuhn's broader thesis, these various disputes were won or lost partly on rational, intellectual criteria, but also on social and cultural ones. For example, Hartshorne fell to Schaefer not because he lacked good, plausible arguments – Hartshorne wears you down with his inexorable, grinding logic – but because he was fighting against the rising tide of a postwar American culture and society, and the economic geography that emerged from it that valued science and technology, instrumental reasoning, and the young and the new (for more details see Barnes, 2000).

As these examples indicate, and as is clear from our opening story, paradigm change has come thick and fast in economic geography over the past fifty years. It’s not quite “if it’s Tuesday it must be Marxism,” but intellectual change has been the disciplinary name of the game for the past half-century. While this might be viewed as a sign of immaturity, of a juvenile flavor-of-the-month mentality, we believe the opposite. We think it indicates intellectual maturity, and that it is characterized by vibrancy, dynamism, and openness. The contemporary American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty argues that there is always hope as long as the conversation continues. From the pieces we have assembled, it is clear that the conversation in economic geography sparkles, and that hope remains vitally alive.

And to prove the point, the first essay by David Harvey (2000) comes from his book, Spaces of Hope. Harvey is the foremost Marxist in Anglo-American geography. In his earlier volume The Limits to Capital, Harvey (1982) provided a geographical exegesis of Marx’s three volumes of Capital, and the Grundisse, giving economic geographers a body of theory, concepts, and a vocabulary to understand the capitalist space economy. But as Harvey now reflects, the Marxism found in that volume, and in the sometimes-covert seminars and lecture courses he has run on Marx since 1971, is out of fashion, or perhaps even worse, normalized. Marx has become just another dead, white European male we need to know a smattering about in order to pass the exam. For Harvey this is both tragic and comic. Marx’s theories, he argues, have never been more relevant to the present generation than they are right now. They are the spitting image of our times. The present generation, including economic geographers, often shuns Marx, however, or provides only ritualistic acknowledgment. They are concerned with carrying out a different paradigm, cultural analysis, rather than political economy, which for them is “much
more fun than being absorbed in the dour world and crushing realities of capitalist exploitation.” But for Harvey it is on those crushing realities that we must concentrate: it is our political and moral obligation.

Andrew Sayer argues that our obligation as economic geographers is to employ a set of methodological precepts drawn from critical realism. Only by drawing on this paradigm can we ensure that radical (Marxist) theorizing and empirical research of the kind sparked by people like Harvey remains consistent, coherent, and compelling. Originating with the writings of two British philosophers, Roy Bhasker and Rom Harré, during the 1970s, critical realism was introduced into geography by Sayer (1984) in the early 1980s, quickly becoming the unofficial paradigm of economic geography for a decade, especially in the UK.

At its most basic, critical realism is an alternative to positivist science (of the kind that dominated economic geography during the 1960s and 1970s) that sought simple empirical relations of association, taken as equivalent to causes. In contrast, Sayer conceives causation as more complicated. He argues that objects, including social objects, contain within them necessary causal powers and liabilities to make things happen, but which are realized only under specific contingent conditions. To use Sayer’s favorite example, a barrel of gunpowder by virtue of its constituent components contains the necessary causal powers to produce an explosion, but whether it does depends upon the contingent fact of someone throwing in a lighted match. Under critical realism, then, we are led to two different but related forms of enquiry. On the one hand, to an abstract examination of the necessary relations that constitute the causative power of an entity (what is it about the abstract chemistry of the various compounds found in gunpowder that makes the combination so volatile?), and, on the other, to a concrete investigation into the multifarious contingent circumstances under which that power is released (Does gunpowder explode when someone accidentally drops a match? Or when a soldier primes the pan of their musket? Or when a miner lights a fuse?).

What does any of this have to do with the project of radical economic geography? Sayer’s argument is that it has been methodologically slipshod, undermining the politically important analysis it carries out on such important topics as industrial location and uneven development. The problem is that radical economic geographers foist abstract, necessary relations on to the concrete world without recognizing the effects that contingent, mediating relations produce. For example, a necessary relation within Marx’s abstract conception of capitalism is the movement of capital to low-cost, profit-maximizing locations; it is as much a defining feature of an abstract capitalism as is the chemical formula for gunpowder. Some radical geographers have then used this necessary relation to make concrete claims about the world. For example, as in the new international division of labor thesis, the idea that manufacturers in developed countries switch their industrial investment to much cheaper developing countries. The problem, though, as Sayer argues, is that a bevy of contingent, concrete relations interrupt the abstract relation, changing its form and consequence, if not negating it altogether. Note, Sayer is not denying the importance of Harvey’s Marxist agenda focusing on a “dour world” and “crushing realities,” but he is saying that to achieve the best purchase on them requires use of at least an ancillary paradigm: critical realism.
The paradigm favored by Ash Amin, institutionalism, is quite different. Originally formulated by the maverick American economist Thorstein Veblen, at the turn of the twentieth century, institutionalism is a third way lying between, on the one hand, a more politically driven and often deterministic Marxism, and, on the other, a more abstract and formal orthodox economics with its uncritical belief in the beneficence of the market. In contrast, institutionalism insists on the centrality of contingent and concrete social, cultural, and political institutions, and their interaction, in the constitution and maintenance of the economy. The economy is always embedded in a set of complex institutional relations that shape and animate it. Failure to recognize their importance results in a failure to comprehend both the economy (and its geography), and the means to effect propitious change. It is around this last issue that Amin works out the meaning of an institutionalist paradigm in economic geography by focusing on policies designed to benefit less-favored regions within industrialized countries. During the 1990s, those policies were often predicated on neo-liberalism, the belief that a market-based solution is best. Following institutionalism, Amin convincingly shows the inadequacy of such a policy, and of the wider approach of orthodox economics justifying it. The problem is that market-based solutions appear best only because of the theoretical assumption of an asocial, acultural, maximizing individual, homo economicus. The effect of such an assumption is to make institutions disappear; they are reduced to the sum of the rational maximizing individuals that compose them. For Amin this is nonsense. Institutions are the very stuff of a real economy, and integral to any solution to economic failure such as found in less-favored regions. The answer is not to ignore institutions, but to nurture tighter, broader, and thicker linkages among them, and by doing so unequivocally rejecting fictions such as homo economicus (satirized by Veblen as a “homogenous globule of desire”). Moreover, this is an inherently geographical project. Institutions are not free-floating, waiflike entities, but substantially grounded in particular places. To practice institutionalism is to practice economic geography.

Amin’s article begins to push economic geography away from strict political economy as imagined by Harvey and Sayer, allowing through the role of institutions an expanded role for the social and cultural. Such a shift is even more clearly defined in Thrift and Olds’ essay that follows. Published in 1996, it has become a manifesto within economic geography for Harvey’s dreaded paradigm of “cultural analysis.” Thrift and Olds’ argument is that there have been sea changes both in the way economies operate, and in the way social sciences represent them, and economic geographers must respond to the new agenda. On the one hand, economy and culture have become “incorrigibly intertwined,” which they illustrate using the example of Christmas. Marking the birth of one of the world’s greatest cultural religious figures, Christmas in high-income Western countries is now also fundamentally about money: of shopping until you drop, of crowded retail malls and shopping centers, of sales and bargains, of gifting, re-gifting, and de-gifting. Is Christmas a cultural celebration? Or is Christmas a once-a-year economic bonanza for capitalism? It is both. And such hybridity, as Thrift and Olds illustrate, is now pervasive: culture and economy are so blurred that it is difficult to know where one begins and the other ends. On the other hand, if blurring is the new reality, how should economic geography as a social science deal with it? They argue, first, by becoming more polycentric, that is, by “celebrating a qualitative multiplicity of ‘economic’