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Bjørn Terje Asheim

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Economic geography as regional contexts' reconsidered – implications for disciplinary division of labour, research focus and societal relevance

Bjørn Terje Asheim

University of Stavanger Business School, University of Stavanger, NO-4036 Stavanger, Norway

ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to discuss whether a definition of economic geography as contextual analysis still is viable and relevant. The author argues that the definition remains the key to the production of high quality and social relevant research. He concludes that contextual analysis represents the competitive advantage of economic geography among other social sciences and the best position to demonstrate its relevance to the broader society.



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Introduction

In 2006, my chapter 'Economic geography as (regional) contexts' was published in the book *Past, Present and Future of Economic Geography*, edited by Bagchi-Sen and Lawton Smith (Asheim 2006). In this article I reconsider the definition of economic geography as contextual analysis and discuss whether it is still a viable and productive way of defining economic geography, and if so, what is the implication of this position for the disciplinary division of labour between the sciences (including the social sciences), for both the research focus and social relevance of economic geography research. I argue that the aforementioned definition of economic geography is still the key to the production of high quality and academically interesting research. I demonstrate the relevance of the definition by using examples from regional innovation policy. I also reflect on the reasons for the seemingly paradoxical situation that, according to my observation, the position of economic geography

at universities in North America and Western Europe (especially in Britain) is steadily becoming weaker, while society's interest in and demand for economic geography research, as seen in the use of economic geographers as experts of DG Regio (the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy) in connection with analyses of smart specialisation policies, is increasing. The aforementioned development trends are also manifested in the migration of economic geographers to business schools. I conclude the article with an assessment of both the consequences for the future of economic geography should these tendencies continue and possible strategies to strengthen the subject's position as an academic discipline.

Economic geography as a social science discipline

The aim of economic geography as any other social science should be to produce excellent academic research

CONTACT Bjørn Terje Asheim  bjorn.t.asheim@uis.no

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that is also social relevant. This dual task is in many ways easier to achieve for economic geography than for other social sciences due to its ontologically synthetic empirical base (Asheim 2006). Being what Kant classified as a physically defined science, geography should be understood as chorology in contrast to logically defined sciences, which are analytical and based on their respective objects of study (Watkins 2012). Torsten Hägerstrand, my PhD supervisor at Lund University, stated that geography is about doing contextual analysis as opposed to compositional analysis, which is the task of logically defined sciences (Hägerstrand 1974). These distinctions are in my view fundamental in understanding the *raison d'être* of geography, as well as its place and position in the division of labour with other social sciences. Context is the key to understanding in a globalised world.

Finding its place in the division of labour among the social sciences is a prerequisite for economic geography to produce excellent academic and social relevant research. Through the performance of contextual and time-specific analysis, economic geography has a unique position among the social sciences, as it is the only discipline in which that is done (Asheim 2006). Contextual analysis is about applying a relational concept of space (i.e. conceptualising space (and time) as intrinsic properties of the study object) (Asheim 2006). The understanding of space as a property of an object, and thus eliminating the distinction of the relative conception of space between the spatial and the non-spatial, was introduced already in the early 1970s by David Harvey in his book *Social Justice and the City* (Harvey 1973).

Looking specifically at human geography, the whole history of ideas of the subject in the last 70–80 years (i.e. since the 1950s and 1940s) can be interpreted as a struggle between a traditional position of geography as an idiographic, physically defined discipline (i.e. regional geography), others wanting to turn human geography into a nomothetic analytical discipline, and later attempts that sought to develop a theoretically informed contextual approach transcending the idiographic-nomothetic dichotomy (Asheim 2006). The nomothetic position was primarily represented by 'spatial analysis' defining the object of study of geography as 'space' (i.e. 'spatial patterns' and 'spatial processes'), leaving 'history' to history and 'society' to the other social sciences, and thus finding a place for human geography among the analytical social sciences (Schaefer 1953). According to my understanding, geography as chorology traditionally implied an analytical distinction between space and society, defined as a non-spatial entity, which was studied by other social scientists. However, this position cannot be a point of departure for a social science, as space as such can never be the starting point for theoretical work within the social sciences.

In the above-described situation, the introduction of a 'realist' approach (Sayer 1992) was extremely helpful. The distinction of realism between abstract and concrete research enables the opposition between nomothetic and idiographic approaches to be transcended (Asheim & Haraldsen 1991). Moreover, it solves the problem of which level of abstraction space can be theorised, as 'concrete research' is the level at which space – as a property of an object and thus analytically inseparable from the object as such – represents an explanatory factor. Sayer underlines that 'even though concrete studies may not be interested in spatial form per se, it must be taken into account if the contingencies of the concrete and the differences they make to outcomes are to be understood' (Sayer 1992, 150). His statement is consistent with an understanding of geographical analyses as contextual, as well as with positioning geography as basically a synthetic discipline.

'Contextual' – still a viable and productive definition of economic geography?

To determine whether an understanding of economic geography as a discipline that does contextual analysis is still viable and productive, several criteria can be applied. One can look at the discipline itself to see whether it delivers excellent academic research that is published in high ranking journals. Another criterion is its strength as a social science among the other social sciences, and a third is its relevance and impact on, as well as use in, society as a supplier of scientific knowledge for analyses and policymaking.

I deal with the question of whether an understanding of economic geography as a discipline that does contextual analysis is still viable and productive in two ways in this article. In this section I consider the position of economic geography and economic geographers as such, and in the next section I discuss the specific competitive advantage of adopting an explicit understanding of economic geography as contextual analysis. Not all economic geographers work with this conceptualisation of the discipline.

Looking at journal rankings among human geography journals, the two leading economic geography journals, *Journal of Economic Geography* and *Economic Geography* are ranked among the five highest ranking journals (Scrimago Lab 2019). In a ranking of the top 20 human geography journals on the University of Leicester's website, the *Journal of Economic Geography* is ranked as No. 4 and *Economic Geography* as No. 5 (University of Leicester n.d.). The three journals ranked above them are typically the journals of the two largest national geographical associations, *Transactions of the Institute of*

British Geographers, *Annals from the Association of American Geographers* and *Progress in Human Geography*. Thus, based on the criterion of delivering excellent academic research that is published in high ranking journals, the position of economic geography within human geography must be characterised as academically strong.

If scholars continue to use journal rankings as a criterion for quality, when looking at the position and strength of economic geography among other social sciences, the journal guide produced by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS), which is the most used journal ranking in departments of economics and management, shows both *Economic Geography* and the *Journal of Economic Geography* as having a category 4 rating, which is the second highest category (4* is the highest) (CABS 2018). As the guide is specifically oriented to subjects taught in such departments, where economic geography is not a core subject, it indicates that economic geography has a strong position. From looking at journals outside economic geography, as another way of assessing the position and strength of the discipline to see whether research by economic geographers is published, my impression is that such research, for example with a focus on structural change, diversification of the economy and innovation, as well as in research on sustainable transition, increasingly finds outlets in leading journals such as *Research Policy*, which has a 4* rank in the Chartered Association of Business Schools' journal guide (CABS 2018).

Another interesting observation, which might be used to assess how economic geography and economic geographers are evaluated among other social sciences and scientists, is the increasing influx of economic geographers into business schools. This development has been highlighted and intensively discussed in Britain, where some regard it as a sign of the strength and relevance of the discipline (Rodríguez-Pose 2018), whereas others see it as a sign of weakness and crisis of the discipline (Martin 2018). The tendency of economic geographers being hired by business schools can be looked upon in both ways. Recruiting economic geographers to business schools is surely a sign of the increased relevance of the insights and perspectives of the discipline, but also a weakness of the discipline as such if the business schools do not teach economic geography. In this way, the migration of economic geographers to business schools at the same time (if they are recruited from geography departments) reduces the capacity to train new economic geographers in 'traditional' geography departments, but they also do not contribute to

reproducing and developing the discipline in the new environments, as economic geography is not a subject taught at the majority of business schools (this point is elaborated in the section '*The migration of economic geographers to business school*'). Another example of the weakening position of economic geography is the tendency in North America, as well as in Britain and the rest of Europe, that chairs in economic geography have not been replaced or have been filled with non-economic geographers, but typically with economists.¹

Illustrating cases of the academic impact of economic geography can be found in research on sustainable transitions (Coenen et al. 2012) and industrial structural change (Boschma 2018). In many ways, it can be claimed that the introduction of the geographical or regional perspective in these areas of research has implied a renewal of the research and increased the societal and policy relevance of it. As all phenomena, for example effects of climate change or industrial restructuring, have a specific location, a general, sectoral or national analysis will ignore the huge geographical differences that exist on lower geographical scales such as the regional and local levels. This disregard matters for the consequences of economic and environmental change, ranging from tornados in the West Indies to drought in sub-Sahara Africa, which are experienced by people at the local level. The disregard is also the reason why a geographical and regional perspective makes contextual research more policy relevant, as solutions to the problems need to be specific and a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is not adequate.

The question of contextual analysis leads me to the next question of the relevance of economic geography research in the wider society. Topics such as industrial structural change, economic diversification and innovation have become prominent in, for example, discussions of economic development and innovation policy (including regional economic development and regional economic policy), such as in the context of the EU's Smart Specialisation strategy (Asheim et al. 2017), which is the contemporary regional innovation policy of EU. Smart Specialisation is a place-based approach, which starts from the current situation of the individual regions and aims at finding solutions that will best promote economic and social development in each and every region (Asheim et al. 2017). Clearly, a general economic analytical approach will not suffice to deliver this. It is interesting to observe that Smart Specialisation, when the idea was conceptualised, did not have an explicit spatial perspective, as it was developed by economists (McCann & Ortega-Argiles 2015). Today, it has an

¹The universities in Cologne and Marburg in Germany are examples from Europe. The University of Cambridge filled an economic geography position with a human geographer in 2011.

explicitly regional focus (being place-based) and the economists who originally came up with the concept now present this approach as economic geography proper (Foray 2017).

Thus, in one way the demand for contextual analyses looks very positive and promising with respect to the standing, position and influence of economic geography academically as well as in the rest of society. In another way, it is also worrying, given the shrinking arenas in which economic geography as an academic discipline is taught and thus can be further reproduced, developed and prosper for future generations. It is clearly fine and important that researchers in other disciplines start using knowledge, methods and perspectives from economic geography. However, it is not *that* positive, as a result may be that economic geography becomes marginalised as an academic discipline at universities. In the next section I look more closely into why a contextual analysis still matters, and how and why such an approach adds strengths and competitive advantage to economic geography.

The intellectual content of economic geography – why contextual analysis still matters

The need for a unique position among social sciences

From Michael Porter, among many scholars, we have learned that having a competitive advantage requires uniqueness in what is offered to the market (Porter 1990). Moreover, uniqueness is based on differentiation, which may create what economists term a ‘Chamberlinian monopolistic competition’ (Chamberlin 1933). Translated to the theme of the place of geography (including economic geography) in the landscape of social sciences, this means that economic geography must offer a social science perspective on problems and solutions that are uniquely different from what other social sciences can offer. This challenge then creates a division of labour within the social sciences, in which the disciplines are complementary as well as competitive. The disciplines are complementary because they represent different perspectives and approaches, and competitive because in a specific context one perspective or approach will give a more satisfactory answer to a problem or explanation of a problem than will another perspective or approach.

The key to the unique position of economic geography is its ontological status as a physically classified science of chorology focusing on the spatial distribution of phenomena, or with a better expression, carrying out contextual analysis (Asheim 2006). As stated in the section ‘Economic geography as a social science discipline’

above, this is the *raison d’être* of geography. All other social sciences, with the exception of history, are logically defined based on their respective object of study (Watkins 2012). As these objects normally are substantially defined (i.e. the economy, social groups, political processes), they do not have an explicit spatial dimension as part of the study object. However, as space is a property of the object, analytically inseparable from the object, space has to be taken into account ‘if the contingencies of the concrete and the differences they make to outcomes are to be understood’ (Sayer 1992, 150) to repeat Sayer’s formulation, which leaves this unique ‘space’ for human and economic geography among the social sciences.

The understanding of space as a property of the object has other implications for economic geography as a scientific discipline. As the other, logically defined, social sciences have a substantial object of study as their focus, this object of study can constitute the basis for theory development. However, space as such cannot be a subject for the development of social science theory, and this idea was the fundamental mistake of the previous spatial analysis tradition in the 1960s (Abler et al. 1971). This further implies that the use of theory in economic geography must be defined based on which objects the contextual analysis is focused upon. Such an approach would make economic geography, as other human geography subdisciplines, an eclectic discipline, which would allow for the selection from various sources what are considered the most relevant theories for the research carried out. Furthermore, this in turn means that economic geography cannot produce original theoretical output as such, but generates theoretical novelty through combinations of existing theories (which was Schumpeter’s definition of innovation (Schumpeter 1934)) determined by the focus of the research undertaken. Generating theoretical novelty by combining existing theories should not be looked upon as a weakness that makes economic geography inferior to other social sciences, but rather as a strength, as it allows economic geography to deal with questions that fall outside the focus of the study object of other social sciences. According to my understanding, in a time when interdisciplinary research is on the rise, especially due to the increased need for research based knowledge to solve the grand societal challenges of our time, all of which are interdisciplinary problems, the advantage of an eclectic approach should be obvious.

The need for an empirical grounding

One implication of economic geography being a physically defined science is its empirical grounding.

Using a realist terminology, this means that the actual theory development in contextual analyses (i.e. the selection of theory input to be combined to suit the research being carried out) must be carried out in place- and time-specific concrete research, not in abstract research, which is the domain of some other social sciences with a tradition for the construction of grand theories (Sayer 1992). Economic geography can have theories developed in abstract research as a point of departure for theory development in its concrete research, but economic geographers should never try to apply those abstract-level theories directly to a specific research topic, as that would lead to a reduction of the impact of what the contingencies of the concrete and its differences make to outcomes. Another advantage of positioning economic geography's contribution to theory development in concrete research is that fundamentalism in research (i.e. that only one superior paradigm is allowed) is avoided.

Fundamentalist positions are often based on theoretical approaches coming from abstract research, as many of the misunderstood Marxist contributions to economic geography in the 1980s and 1990s clearly demonstrated (Soja 1980; Harvey 1982). The combined situating of economic geography as an eclectic subject with theory development taking place in concrete research also makes irrelevant the problem raised by Hassink & Gong (2017) about the fragmentation of economic geography and the need for an integrative paradigm. The integrative paradigm of economic geography is its ontological position of doing contextual analysis, and the fragmentation – meaning the existence of many schools of thoughts with respect to theoretical traditions and approaches in the discipline as well as its themes – is an advantage. In this respect, one hegemonic theoretical position is that theories and themes, which represent fundamentalism, should be avoided in all social sciences.

Some of the confusion over the focus of economic geography is due to the lack of understanding of economic geography as a physically defined science, which according to my observations, especially in Anglo-American human geography, has led to geographers carrying out all types of research. This makes it difficult to preserve an identity as a discipline, as human geography research cannot be distinguished from other social sciences' research (with the exception of its often poor quality, as human geographers normally do not have a broad background in other social sciences (Gregory 1994)). The tendency for an universal approach has been especially evident in Britain, where human geography always has had a strong position as one of the larger social sciences (due to Britain's colonial period, when cartographic knowledge, which was supplied by

geographers, was important). Geography's strong position in Britain has led to an attitude that human geographers could undertake all kinds of research irrespective of themes and theoretical approaches. Thus, their undertaking of all kinds of research is not a problem of economic geography as such, but of the traditions of the culture and institutions in which it is practised or 'malpractised'. A contextual analytical approach would correct the lack of focus, which should not be conflated with practising naive empiricism, since a realist approach advocates theoretically informed concrete studies (Sayer 1992).

Does economic geography need an integrative paradigm?

Hassink & Gong (2017, 3) propose that an integrative paradigm of economic geography should consist of a core and what they call 'three inter-related ontological foundations, namely networks, evolution and institutions'. The core, which they describe as constituted by 'economic activities in space, place and scales and their drivers' (Hassink & Gong 2017, 3), represents a contextual analytical perspective, as described thus far in this article, while what they call the three interrelated ontological foundations are not ontological foundations but theoretical prepositions, and thus should not be part of an integrative paradigm as it would then run the risk of becoming fundamentalist. The core perspective of a contextual analytical approach, which is an ontological foundation, should be sufficient as an integrative focus of economic geography. As already explained, economic geography as a physically defined science cannot have a 'core theory', which as Hassink & Gong (2017, 6) claim is one of the major problems of what they define as a 'fragmented' discipline.

In contrast to most Anglo-American economic geographical works (although there are though excellent exceptions such as the work by Michael Storper (1997), Andres Rodríguez-Pose (2013), Ron Martin (2010), and some of the geographers from Newcastle University in the UK (MacKinnon et al. 2009)), continental European economic geographers have succeeded in applying an explicit spatial, contextual perspective in their analyses of 'economic activities in space, place and scales' to quote Hassink & Gong (2017, 3). This might be one explanation for why economic geography has been able to retain a stronger position in human geography departments, relatively speaking, than has been the case in the Anglo-American world. One illustration of the strengthened position is the increasing dominance of continental European economic geographers in the sessions on

economic geography at the annual meetings of the Association of American Geographers, which I have observed while present at these sessions since 2000. In my view, the relatively few participants from the Anglo-American world in these sessions characteristically practise economic geography inspired and influenced by, and often in cooperation with, continental European economic geographers. This better position of continental European economic geography is – according to my observation – also manifested in a higher degree of political influence with respect to being used to supply input to and carry out analyses of various national and European regional policy initiatives, of which the EU’s Smart Specialisation policy for innovation-driven regional economic diversification and development (mentioned already in the section ‘Contextual’ – still a viable and productive definition of economic geography?) is the most significant example. Thus, in contrast to Hassink & Gong (2017), I would argue that what matters with respect to getting attention from policymakers and practitioners, and making economic geographic research relevant is not to strive towards an integrative theoretical paradigm, which would, as argued above, reduce its competitive advantage, but to make sure that a strong ontological core of doing contextual analysis exists.

Hassink et al. (2018) have a point when they argue that the international academic discourse in the discipline (i.e. economic geography) is still dominated by Anglo-American economic geographers. In addition to the suppression of research from non-English speaking parts of the world, which is the main point of the article by Hassink et al. (2018), perhaps a bigger problem is the monopoly of defining what societal problems are to be researched and the theoretical and methodological ways in which to study them, since this goes directly to the core of what is the potential strength of geography, including economic geography, in relation to other social sciences, namely its capacity for contextual analysis. The contextual approach would secure that relevant problems for the actual regions are studied, and that adequate theories and methodologies are chosen to carry out the research. Given the huge differences existing in the world between, for instance, developed and developing nations despite the ongoing globalisation, and the large variations that exist even between developed capitalist economies, illustrated for instance by what research using the varieties of the capitalism framework and its distinction between liberal and organised market economies is telling us (Hall & Soskice 2001), a tendency for intellectual hegemony in a discipline with respect to study objects and theoretical approaches will limit the usefulness and relevance of the results of the research.

One example of the tendency for intellectual hegemony is the discourse of neoliberalism framed within a (Marxist) political economy theoretical approach. Even if since the 1980s there has been a tendency towards a stronger dominance of the market in national and global economies, the extent and form of this increased market penetration of the economy and society varies greatly between, for instance, liberal and organised market economies (Hall & Soskice 2001). Neoliberalism was fundamentally an Anglo-American phenomenon that developed during the regimes of Ronald Reagan in the USA and Margaret Thatcher in the UK, and spread to the rest of the world (Springer et al. 2016). However, the extent, form and impact of the neoliberal policy has to be understood and explained in the context of the economy, policy, culture, and institutions of a given country, which requires a contextual analysis with a relevant theoretical framework developed to analyse the conditions of the specific country or region under study. The problem of reduced relevance of not considering the relevance of the topic investigated (neoliberalism) is worsened by using a political economy theoretical framework, which has a tendency of remaining on the abstract research level, and thus is too general and not specific enough for use when performing contextual analyses as part of concrete research. The tendency has resulted in many years of research focusing on themes that, due to the dominance and hegemony of the Anglo-American world within economic geography, was considered most important but that in the context of the specific country or region studied was in the best cases of little relevance (Peck & Tickell 2002). It was often also a non-problem that shifted focus and resources away from researching actual problems in the given societies (Peck & Theodore 2010).

A further problem that Hassink & Gong (2017, 7) raise in connection with their claim of the problems of fragmentation is that the fragmentation has been worsened by ‘economic geographers crossing the borders to neighbouring social sciences, such as in the UK, where more and more economic geographers take positions at business or management schools’. This problematic development has also been intensively discussed in several articles in *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, among them articles authored by Martin (2018) and Rodríguez-Pose (2018) mentioned earlier, in the section ‘Contextual’ – still a viable and productive definition of economic geography?’ In the next section I deal with this problem and discuss the consequences for the development of economic geography as a discipline, and how the problem can be solved to avoid ending up in the paradoxical situation that the position of economic geography steadily becomes weaker, while

society's interest in and demand for economic geography knowledge and research increases.

The organisational and institutional 'location' of economic geography

Geography is a strange discipline with respect to its organisational and institutional 'location' at universities. Traditionally, human and physical geography have constituted one department, which can be found in all faculties: science, art, and social science. This is the normal model in, for example, Britain, which is a stronghold of geography. Such a model gives the advantage of scale, which secures strong funding, even in an art faculty, which as a rule has weaker funding than a science faculty in need of costly equipment and laboratories, through cross-funding at the university level. The disadvantage of having human and physical geography in the same department is the potential isolation of the various subdisciplines of geography not being located in proximity to neighbouring disciplines. At Utrecht University, which has the largest faculty of geosciences in the Western world, there are separate departments for the subdisciplines of geography, namely human and physical geography, yet the problems of isolation from neighbouring disciplines remains. The latter problem was solved in Sweden in the early 1950s when geography was split at the three major universities at Uppsala, Lund and Gothenburg, in each case with human geography located in the faculty of social sciences and physical geography in the science faculty (Asheim 1987). The main argument for this separation was precisely to obtain synergy effects by being located in proximity to neighbouring disciplines. Based on my own long career in Swedish geography, I would argue that the fact that human and physical geography were housed in different faculties proved this to be the case for many years, and is one explanation for the strength of Swedish human geography.

In Norway, both of the above-mentioned solutions for the faculty location of geography existed until the 1990s, even if the Oslo model was kind of a hybrid solution with a common department belonging to two faculties: human geography in the art faculty and physical geography in the science faculty. Geography was institutionalised at the Royal Frederik University (today, the University of Oslo) in 1917, many years before a social science faculty was established in 1963. In 1994, human geography was moved to the social sciences and joined sociology in a common department. This has turned out to be a success story, as human geography has experienced a continuous increase in student numbers and funding. In Bergen and Trondheim, where

geography was established later at the universities, in the late 1940s and mid-1970s respectively, human geography has always been in the social science faculty. Even if some of the people employed in the two departments are physical geographers, the departments are basically departments of human geography.

Hassink & Gong (2017, 7) argue that 'because of the lacking core and identity, economic geography's voice is hardly heard by geographical economists and other neighbouring social sciences'. I would argue that when this is the case, as with much of Anglo-American economic geography, it is caused by geographers forgetting the contextual perspective that represents the core and identity of geography, including economic geography, as a physically defined science, and constitutes what makes it unique in the world of social sciences. However, the progress of human geography at the University of Oslo was due to the focus on contextual analyses in an attempt to obtain a competitive advantage among the social sciences by doing something that the other social sciences were not doing, thus being primarily complementary and not competitive. In this context it may be worthwhile to remember that the reason why renowned British sociologist Anthony Giddens started to read works by Swedish geographer Torsten Hägerstrand was precisely to learn how to think contextually, a competence that sociology traditionally did not provide (Gregory 1984). This observation of Giddens illustrates the complementarity of the contextual approach to the perspectives of the logically defined social sciences and their focus on their objects of study.

The migration of economic geographers to business school

As mentioned earlier in this article (in the section 'Contextual' – still a viable and productive definition of economic geography?), the migration of economic geographers in Britain has been the object of intense discussions. Some, such as Ron Martin (2018), ask whether British economic geography is in decline. Martin (2018, 1) argues that 'this movement is in fact part of a wider de-prioritisation and emasculation of economic geography within many geography departments across the country'. Others, such as Andres Rodríguez-Pose (2018), argue that the positive aspects in this transfer more than compensate for the negative ones. Rodríguez-Pose maintains that economic geographers' move to business schools is flattering,

as it reflects their worth in a broad academic market. Getting a job in a Business School indicates that what they are doing is of interest not just to geographers,

but also to broader sectors of academia and society ... [and as such] enhance[s] the overall standing of economic geography ... [which] ... is fantastic news for Geography as a whole. After decades of retreat, geographers are *colonising* other disciplines. (Rodríguez-Pose 2018, 1501)

My personal academic career can be used to discuss and elaborate whether the migration to business schools represents a problem or rather should be looked upon as a blessing. I started my career as an economic geographer at the Norwegian School of Economics in Bergen, when it offered economic geography as one of the elective subjects for students. Economic geography formed a common human geography department with the University of Bergen. Students at the business school could select economic geography as a minor subject, but they could study for a doctoral degree in economic geography at the business school. Having economic geography as a subject used to be a tradition until the end of the 1990s at Nordic business schools (i.e. in Norway, Sweden and Finland), all of which had a chair in economic geography. This meant two advantages were possible: to reproduce and develop the subject through teaching and research, and to interact with and diffuse the understanding of the spatial dimensions of the economy to neighbouring disciplines and students from other subjects. Today, there is only one chair left at a Nordic business school, namely at Stockholm Business School.

After I completed my doctoral thesis in Lund in 1979 I worked in human geography departments, first at the University of Oslo, where I was professor in human economic geography from 1993, and then at Lund University, where I held the chair in economic geography from 2001 to 2015. At both universities, economic geography had a strong position – in Oslo, both in teaching and research, and in Lund mainly in research, as the recruitment of students interested in economic geography was difficult due to the location in the social science faculty, where economic geography was the only taught subject that included some form of economics. All other economics subjects, such as economics and economic history, which at other universities were normally located in a social science faculty, were located at the School of Economics and Management, Lund University.

The general impact of economic geography research with respect to the broader society was greater in the Department of Human Geography at Lund University compared with geography departments in universities in Norway, due to the stronger position of human geography in Sweden than in Norway. This became evident when, in 2002, I initiated a centre of innovation research, CIRCLE (Centre for Innovation, Research and Competence in the Learning Economy), established

in 2004, where the research group of economic geographers who were studying regional innovation and development became the largest of the four research groups at the centre, and was very successful in obtaining external funding. However, CIRCLE did not provide any teaching and therefore all of the human resources contributed little to the basic training of economic geographers, even though some of the researchers taught in the human geography department, where I still had my chair. However, researchers doing regional innovation studies at CIRCLE were awarded their PhDs in economic geography at the geography department, as CIRCLE was never allowed to award PhDs in innovation studies, and in this way they contributed to the further development of economic geography research. Many of those researchers did not have a background in economic geography, but in other social sciences, and thus represented a positive expansion of the recruitment base for doctoral candidates in economic geography.

In 2013 I became professor in economic geography and innovation theory at the University of Stavanger Business School and its Centre for Innovation Research. There, economic geography is not a taught subject, but its perspectives enter into the study programmes through specialisation in strategic innovation at master's level. Thus, there is no basic training of new economic geographers, but both the spatial perspective on the economy and the contextual analytical approach, which are so important to be able to manoeuvre in a globalised world, are provided to the students.

My conclusion on the British discussion of the positive and negative aspects of the migration of economic geographers from human geography departments to business schools is that both Ron Martin (2018) and Andres Rodríguez-Pose (2018) are partially correct. Clearly, this represents a huge problem if economic geography ceases to be taught at human geography departments at universities, as the basic training as well as specific research in economic geography, which is key for reproducing the discipline, will be lost, and thereby the subject will gradually disappear as a university discipline. However, it is also important that students outside economic geography are introduced to the importance and relevance of the spatial perspectives on the economy, perhaps not least in business schools, as the contextual analytical approach is the key to understanding the globalised world, where business is a main actor and driving factor. One solution to this problem would be to introduce or reintroduce economic geography as a separately taught subject at business schools, and the second solution would be to refocus on economic geography's strength in the performance of contextual analyses as its competitive advantage, which makes

the discipline unique compared with other social sciences at universities.

Conclusions

In this article I have maintained that economic geographers should underline the capacity of contextual analyses, and that this way of defining the discipline is still a viable and productive positioning of economic geography among the other social sciences. This contextual definition of economic geography can contribute high quality and academically interesting research, as well as being of relevance to society. It constitutes the uniqueness of the discipline compared with other social sciences, and is its competitive advantage. The contextual approach also represents the best position from which to demonstrate economic geography's relevance to the broader society with respect to providing solutions to many societal problems. This is not least the case because economic geography is an eclectic discipline due to its physical classification. This in turn represents an integrative potential, which is clearly needed to contribute to solving the larger societal problems, all of which are interdisciplinary in character.

I have also discussed the potential paradoxical situation that the position of economic geography at universities is becoming weaker, while the demand for economic geography knowledge in society, as exemplified by EU's Smart Specialisation strategy (the EU's innovation policy with an explicit regional focus), is increasing. This development is also manifested in the academic world in the migration of economic geographers to business schools, especially in Britain. The problem is a serious one, as economic geography represents knowledge and perspectives that are vital in a globalised world to take responsible decisions as well as to solve societal problems. If economic geography is not represented as a discipline to be taught and researched at universities and business schools, the aforementioned important knowledge will be gradually lost, which implies that the spatial dimension of the economy and society would not be present in teaching and research, as well as for instance in policy discussions. Such a development represents a fundamental problem, since at the end of the day it is people in concrete spaces who face the consequences, can make a change, or have to adapt to serious and challenging situations, of which the world will not see fewer in the coming future.

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