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Creating a vibrant and sustainable economic geography?

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The research report “We’re In Business! Sustaining Economic Geography?”, James *et al.* (2018), and subsequent replies have generated conflicting intellectual and emotional responses for me at a personal level, as I am both an economic geographer working in a Management department and the incoming Chair of the EGRG. I interpret the James *et al.* (2018) research as a call for us all to help ‘solve’ the identified ‘problems’ with Economic Geography. In one respect, the ‘naming and mapping’ of the key parameters of the trend by James *et al.* (2018) allows us to understand the extent of the migration of economic geographers to business and management schools (henceforth B&M Schools), but it also allows us to pause and reflect on our individual circumstances, career decisions and the future direction of EG. While I share a little of Rodríguez-Pose (2018)’s optimism about the strength of economic geography, James *et al.*’s (2018) and Barnes (2018)’s concerns about the future of economic geography give us cause to reflect on the direction of our sub-discipline. This reply places greater emphasis on longer term and systemic problems in economic geography than is evident in the James *et al.* (2018) paper or in subsequent replies, focusing on the broader context of the loss of economic geographers and associated leadership problems, lack of diversity and concerns around the perception of economic geography. The paper will reflect on the capacity for the Royal Geographical Society’s Economic Geography Research Group, to support economic geographers and strengthen the sub-discipline.

James *et al.*’s (2018) research has highlighted a contemporary problem within economic geography – the dramatic shift in the number of economic geographers employed in B&M Schools. Thanks to that research we can now estimate the volume of the movement and have data on the reasons given by respondents for their move. What are less clear are the medium- and long-term impacts of this movement, which will now decline as few economic geographers remain in geography departments. I suggest that in many respects economic geography has been running headlong into troubled ground, particularly around reproduction of the field, independent of the loss of individuals to other disciplinary homes. In fact, these systemic problems have exacerbated the movement of economic geographers to Business and Management Schools and also prevented their return to geography departments.

Of course, the migration of economic geographers must be situated in the broader academic context, in which the cultural turn, the professionalisation of universities and the RAE/REF (Research Assessment Exercise/Research Excellence Framework) have placed pressures on economic geography as a discipline and on individual research career trajectories. There are several routes 'out' of geography including 'upstream' movement. Economic geographers appear to be in high demand as university senior management. Yet I do not see sufficient discussion within this debate about the loss of economic geographers to management roles, often with the almost inevitable decline in research activity. If 'blame' is to be apportioned (which I strongly hope is not the case) it lies with *all* those who have left UK economic geography, not just those in B&M schools.

James *et al* (2018) cite the retirement of leading economic geographers – such as Peter Daniels, Peter Dicken, Ray Hudson, Roger Lee, Ron Martin and Linda McDowell – as exacerbating the one-way movement of economic geographers. Actually, we can see the winding-down and retirement of these leading economic geographers as creating sizeable intellectual, leadership and pastoral gaps in economic geography *that have not been replaced*. Where are our heroes? The subsequent generation of economic geographers have (perhaps through necessity due to the shifting nature of academic life) not been able to create (or even sustain existing) centres of critical mass. As Peter Dicken's last PhD student, I was the end of a sizeable 'family tree', which includes Henry Yeung and Adam Tickell, centred on Manchester. For various reasons, Manchester is no longer a core centre of economic geography, and this cannot be blamed on movement to B&M Schools. There has been no movement of economic geographers to Manchester Business School (or other B&M schools). Instead, economic geographers have left for other geography departments or left the UK entirely. The loss of leading economic geographers to other countries is a factor not mentioned in any of the debate thus far. As in many other universities, Manchester geography lost two leading scholars - Jamie Peck to the US then Canada and Neil Coe to Singapore.

Why do so few economic geographers return to geography? Both James *et al*. (2018) and Leyshon (2018) cite salaries as the reason for this, when in reality the inability to return is far more complex. It is not necessarily always about salary (let's face it, most of us aren't in academia for the financial remuneration), but the interplay of several factors. A key reason, as identified by both James *et al* (2018) and Leyshon (2018) is the lack of advertised

economic geography posts, and the recruitment process. Many B&M Schools use recruitment firms and head hunting is common. While salaries are attractive, it is also the internal research funding and availability of professional services support that appeal. B&M Schools often struggle to attract external research funding and incoming economic geographers typically find a team of people in place to support their grant applications and there are proportionally fewer people making grant applications in B&M Schools. Economic geographers therefore become more aware of their market value *and* their competitive advantages. My employment contract in Bristol's management school specifies and quantifies my additional 'personal market worth'. Even though we should also be aware that this also problematises our labour in the neoliberal university in different ways, I wonder if such language ever used in recruitment in geography? Academia is a challenging environment and the pull towards a context in which you (initially at least) feel highly valued is compelling and acts as a disincentive to returning to a geography department.

Many economic geographers working in B&M Schools have felt excluded by economic geography following their move and for me this hasn't been accurately reflected in James *et al.* (2018)'s report. A culture of 'them' and 'us', with a smattering of perceived (but hopefully not real) blame has developed. This is acting as a barrier to wider participation in economic geography events and broader contribution to the EG community. As the new EGRG Chair I have already received more than a handful of emails from economic geographers in B&M Schools saying that in the past they have felt either unwelcome at economic geography events and/or unsure how they fit into the community. Those economic geographers who have made the move to B&M Schools often feel isolated. For many, they are the only geographer (economic or otherwise) in their school and as such spend much time performing the repetitive task of explaining what 'space' and 'place' are. James *et al* (2018: 6) note that those moving into B&M Schools are 'feeling a little alien' at first but that it is 'highly preferable to not being in a position at all'. A necessary evil then? No-one is entirely sure why the geographers are moving and we can contrast James *et al.* (2018)'s reporting of complexity in motivation (but primarily negative) with Rodriguez-Pose's (2018: 2) celebration of 'geographers colonising other disciplines' through conscious decision and choice. What we do know is that economic geography as a sub-discipline is worried about engagement and sustainability, meanwhile dozens of economic geographers sit isolated in other disciplinary contexts, excluded by their perception of how economic geography regards them.

Just as concerning are the silences around gender dynamics within economic geography. The male dominance of economic geography is too frequently an accepted and uncontested characteristic of the subdiscipline (cf. Bracken and Mawdsley, 2003), as is the lack of diversity in general. James *et al.* (2018: 10) make a significant comment: ‘given that the patterns of cross-disciplinary labour mobility identified in the EGRG report include a sizeable cohort of female colleagues moving out of an already male-dominated discipline, our conversations, networking and capacity building efforts also need to address this issue through meaningful engagements with the RGS-IBG Gender and Feminist Research Group’. Why not also try to meaningfully engage with female economic geographers (both inside and outside geography departments) and actively strategise to increase female participation in economic geography?

Being a female economic geographer is not without challenges regardless of the discipline in which you are employed. The white, typically privileged and male dominance of economic geography is exclusionary. I have lost track of the hours I have spent politely nodding while male economic geography colleagues discuss their football rivalries (this assumes you have managed to negotiate access to the rarefied, invitation-only pub gatherings). Geography conferences tend not to have any dedicated social activities, which creates barriers, particularly for PhD students and early career researchers who are eager to network and converse with senior academics and their peers. This contrasts with many other disciplines, including management, where greater effort is made to be inclusive and where it is often easier to build networks. As a result, economic geographers in B&M schools are embedded in management and geography networks, but with the former offering greater diversity. Even today, female economic geographer voices are struggling to be heard - few Chairs of the EGRG have been female and no women economic geographers were involved in the production of the James *et al.* (2018) report. Even more stark is the lack of diversity. To my recollection all EGRG Chairs have been white.

The lack of diversity in economic geography is a core issue that speaks directly to the previously identified issues around sustainability and replication of the discipline. When academics from other disciplines first begin to read papers written by economic geographers they are often excited by our curiosity, rich contextuality, rigorous empirical grounding and multi-scalar perspectives. Those academics frequently speak highly about the quality of our research – as demonstrated by the popularity and impact of economic geography journals.

However, little of this interest is translated into meaningful engagement with economic geography or growth of the discipline. A significant part of the problem is economic geography's image. It is perceived as pale, male and stale, both within geography and beyond.

What role then can we as individual economic geographers, and the Economic Geography Research Group as a collaborative effort, play in minimising and eventually correcting these systematic issues? The ongoing debate in this journal has made it clear that the notion of a network focused on existing centres of geography (as proposed by James *et al.* 2018) is exclusionary. Any network that emerges cannot be limited to these existing centres (Leyshon, 2018). It must be open, inclusive and supportive. Existing geography departments have centres of critical mass that can act as connecting nodes for the community, but we cannot rely on these centres to prop up the whole community. That burden is too high, and those departments are busy battling other issues including survival. We need to draw together the large number of economic geographers that we have lost (or are about to lose). We also need to attract participation from other scholars – from within geography and beyond - with aligned research interests. It is no requirement that an EGRG member identify as an economic geographer and our understandings of who or what constitutes 'an economic geography' must become less constrained (see also Barnes (2018: 3)'s call to 'lower the drawbridge').

This leads me to reflect on what we expect from senior academics in our subdiscipline and how we can collectively enable a more collaborative and supportive environment in which we can all pursue engaging, impactful and meaningful research *and* find time to support our subdiscipline. Economic geographers involved in senior university management may wish to reflect on their capacity to provide further support for economic geography. Leyshon (2018) calls on heads of geography departments to fund and recruit economic geographers but this call needs to extend also to those higher in the management hierarchy (where more than a handful of economic geographers sit).

The EGRG will be developing strategies in three areas; first, addressing the image of economic geography and seeking to broaden the appeal of engagement with the EGRG; second, through better supporting post graduate and early-career researchers, and third, developing collaborative strategies around research grants. This reply argues that in of itself the movement of economic geographers to B&M Schools is not the primary problem facing

economic geography. Rather, it is a symptom of broader changes in the academic environment (particularly REF) *and* larger systemic issues in economic geography that have been overlooked for many years. It is our collective responsibility to work to overcome these deficiencies and thereby create a vibrant and sustainable economic geography for ourselves and future generations.

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